SPETSNAZ

A History of the Soviet and Russian Special Forces

TOR BUKKVOLL

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MODERN WAR STUDIES

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A HISTORY OF THE SOVIET AND RUSSIAN SPECIAL FORCES

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CONTENTS

Note on Etymology and Translations

Abbreviations

Acknowledgments

Prologue

1. Preparing for a Major War, 1950–1979
    - *Spetsnaz—a Strategic Necessity*
    - *Finding Their Form*
    - *Soviet Frogmen*
    - *The Birth of Siblings*
    - *Spetsnaz and the International Proletariat*
    - *The Crimean School of Insurgency*

2. Heroes of a Lost War, 1979–1989
    - *Into Afghanistan*
    - *Spetsnaz Returns*
    - *Spetsnaz Tensions with the Regular Army*
    - *Operation Zavesa (Curtain)*
    - *Krer and Other Strongholds*
    - *On Communist Loyalty*
    - *Spetsnaz Advisers*
    - *The Never-Ending Problem of Intelligence*
    - *Hunting from the Air—the Spetsnaz Helicopter Advantage*

Spetsnaz KGB and Ideas About a Population-Centric Approach
Was It Worth It?

3. Navigating Breakdown, 1989–2008
Spetsnaz and the Political Leadership in the 1990s
The Tajik Civil War
The First Chechen War
The Second Chechen War
"May You Live in Interesting Times"

4. Return of Great-Power Competition, 2008–2023
Spetsnaz in the War with Georgia
Spetsnaz GRU in the Serdiukov Reforms
SSO—Russia's Delta Force?
FSB Center for Special Operations
Spetsnaz GRU, Irregular Warfare, and Ivashutin's Ghost
The Annexation of Crimea and Instigation of Armed Conflict in Donbas
Spetsnaz as a Global Asset—the Case of Syria

Epilogue

Notes

Bibliography

Index

Photo Gallery

NOTE ON ETYMOLOGY AND TRANSLATIONS

This book is about special forces, also known as special operations forces, in the Soviet Union and Russia up to today. When lowercased, the collective noun "spetsnaz" (pl.) refers generically to such forces and their soldiers; an individual soldier could also be a spetsnaz (sing.). When capitalized, it designates the military branch itself: Spetsnaz GRU (SzGRU), referring to the special operations forces subordinated to the military intelligence service. The term is a syllabic acronym deriving from the Russian phrase for "special purpose" (*spetsialnoe naznachenie*). When the Soviet security services went defunct, the special operations units were inherited by the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the new Russian Ministry of Defense and the KGB successors FSK (1993–1995) and FSB after that.

All translations from the Russian are done by the author, and the transliteration is following the Library of Congress Romanization Tables for Russian and Ukrainian Translations and names have been corrected according to Library of Congress except in a few cases where individuals or geographical places are better known in a different transliteration. Thus, for example, "Yanukovych" is used instead of "Ianukovych." Common foreign terms and phrases will be *italicized* at first mention (with English translation in parentheses); references to organizations, military branches, and such will be rendered in standard font (and capitalized if proper nouns) in the original and romanized variants.

ABBREVIATIONS

AGS-17	Avtomaticheskii Granatamet Stankovyi—automatic grenade launcher
AK-47	Avtomat Kalashnikova—Soviet-made Kalashnikov assault rifle
APC	armored personnel carrier
BMD	Boevaia Mashina Desanta—infantry fighting vehicle for the Soviet and later Russian Airborne forces
BMP	Boevaia Mashina Pekhoty—infantry fighting vehicle
BTR	Bronetransporter—armored personnel carrier
CSO	FSB Center for Special Operations (Tsentr Spetsialnykh Operatsii)
DNR	Donetskaia Narodnaia Respublika—Donetsk People's Republic
DShK	Degtiareva-Shpagina Krupnokalibernyi Pulemet—heavy machine gun
ENOT	Edinye Narodnye Obshchinnye Tovarishchestva—United People's Communal Partnerships (Russian private military company)
FCD	First Chief Directorate of the KGB (foreign intelligence)
FSB	Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti—Federal Security Service
FSK	Federalnaia Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki—Federal Service of Counterintelligence (the immediate predecessor to the FSB)
GMD	Gavrdeiskaia Motostrelkovaia Divizia—Guards motorized rifle division

GRU	Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie—Main Intelligence Directorate (Russian military intelligence)
GUGI	Glavnoe Upravlenie Glubokovodnykh Issledovanii—Main Directorate for Deep-Sea Research
GUIN	Glavnoe Upravlenie Ispolnenia Nakazanii—Russian prison police
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham
ITF	Interagency Task Force (coordinating agency for different Russian forces during the Second Chechen War)
JTAC	joint terminal attack controller
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti—State Committee for Security (Soviet civilian intelligence and security service)
KhAD	Khadamat-e Aetlaat-e Dawlati—Afghanistan's state intelligence agency (1978–1992)
KPVT	Krupnokalibernyi Pulemet Vladimirova Tankovyi—Vladimirov heavy tank-mounted machine gun
KUOS	Kursy Usovershenstvovania Ofitserskogo Sostava—Advanced Training Courses for Officers (KGB special forces training)
LNR	Luganskaia Narodnaia Respublika—Lugansk People's Republic
MANPAD	Man-Portable Air-Defense System
MBT	main battle tank
MOD	Ministry of Defense
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, a guerrilla movement; later the governing party in Angola)
MRP	Morskoi Razvedyvatelnyi Punkt—Naval Intelligence Unit (main organizational unit for Soviet and later Russian naval special operations forces)

MVD	Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del—Ministry of the Interior (Russia)
MVS	Ministerstvo Vnutrishnikh Sprav—Ministry of the Interior (Ukraine)
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NKVD	Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del—Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs (predecessor to the KGB)
OAG	Operativno-Agenturnaia Gruppa—GRU operational intelligence cells in Afghanistan
OMON	Otriad Mobilnyi Osobogo Naznachenia—Special Purpose Mobile Unit (special riot police units)
PKT	Pulemet Kalashnikova Tankovyi—Kalashnikov tank-mounted machine gun
PMC	private military company
POW	prisoner of war
RJC	regional joint command
RPG	Ruchnoi Protivotankovyi Granatamet—handheld rocket-propelled antitank grenade
RTR	Rosssiiskoe Televidenie i Radio—Russian radio and TV company
SAS	Special Air Service (special operations forces of the United Kingdom)
SBU	Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy—Ukrainian Security Service
SEAL	Sea, Air, and Land—United States Navy special operations forces
SOBR	Spetsialnyi Otriad Bystrogo Reagirovania—rapid-reaction police/military units within the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya)
SOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
SOF	special operations forces
SOSUS	Sound Surveillance System
SSO	Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsii—Special Operations Command

SSSR	Soiuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik—Soviet Union (USSR)
SVR	Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki—Russian civilian foreign intelligence
SzGRU	Spetsnaz GRU
SzKGB	Spetsnaz KGB (and successor Spetsnaz FSB/FSK); also known as "Komitetchiki"
SzVDV	Spetsnaz Airborne
TMD	Turkestan Military District
TOW	tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided (antitank missile system)
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UDT	underwater demolition team
VDV	Vozdushno-Desantnye Voiska—Russian Airborne troops
VMF	Voenno-Morskoi Flot—Soviet (and later Russian) navy

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The responsibility for any remaining mistakes and errors is of course entirely mine.

PROLOGUE

The church was entirely white in color and topped with a single black onion-shaped cupola. This recently rebuilt place of worship stood in the middle of the decaying fifteenth-century fortress of Gdov in Pskov County, western Russia.[1] The austere-looking Russian Orthodox sanctity was a fitting place to put to rest the remains of the 24-year-old *spetsnaz* soldier Stepan Zhuravlev. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself had declared that the invasion of Ukraine was a fight against the ungodly and morally corrupt West. According to him, Zhuravlev and the other Russian soldiers were going south to save the Ukrainian people from such religious and spiritual decay. In addition, the war was necessary to make Russia safe. Thus, saying farewell to Stepan in a stronghold originally built to defend the motherland against the medieval Germanic Tectonic order would not be symbolically wrong.

It was scorching hot that day in July 2022 when they carried the coffin into the church. The presiding ecclesiastic, Archpriest Vasilii Lupakov, praised the deceased. In fact, he lauded that "there are still those ready to defend the Russian soil. Today they demonstrate miracles of heroism." Stepan had fallen in battle about five months earlier while entering the city of Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine. He left behind a wife and a two-year-old daughter. When the lid was taken off, all that the nearly 200 mourners could see was a black cellophane bag and Stepan's parade uniform. The bag contained his remains. His identity had been possible to establish only through DNA analysis. Stepan's mother ran her fingers along the bag to somehow be nearer to her son. After the priest spoke, the commander of Stepan's unit,

Aleksandr Antonov, took his turn. The unit was the 2nd Spetsnaz GRU Brigade located in Promezhitsy on the outskirts of Pskov. Formed by the Soviet Union in 1950 as the military arm of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU—Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie), Spetsnaz GRU (SzGRU) was the country's first such force. Antonov mumbled some words about how Stepan in particular had made a great contribution to freeing Ukraine from the Nazi regime of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi.

A less glorified account of what had happened in Kharkiv that morning comes from Ukrainian sources as well as from a captured Russian spetsnaz soldier. These assert that Stepan's detachment had been driving into Kharkiv in the early hours of 27 February. They were about 20 operators. The unit had left Russian territory at three o'clock in the morning and were progressing down Shevchenko Street, one of the main arteries into town. The fighters moved forward in a column of five lightly armored Tigr (Tiger) infantry mobility vehicles. Someone had painted the Russian recognition letter Z on the vehicles' doors. As they drove up to a Ukrainian roadblock, the Ukrainians opened fire. Three of the Tigrs caught fire. All the spetsnaz attempted to exit their vehicles. Two failed and burned to death. The rest while under fire were able to reach a three-story schoolhouse less than 100 meters away. There, they managed to temporarily barricade themselves. Soon, however, a Ukrainian BTR-4 infantry fighting vehicle approached from the direction of the city center. The spetsnaz were able to neutralize this danger by a well-placed shot from a grenade launcher. The lonely driver was mowed down as soon as he exited the vehicle. Next, however, the Ukrainians were able to bring up a main battle tank (MBT). This much more formidable menace took position across the street from the school. It sent a number of volleys through the school's doors and windows. In no time the whole building was aflame. The spetsnaz had little choice but to escape through the windows. Once out on the street, however, they were mercilessly gunned down by the Ukrainians. Only two survived,

including Sergeant Maxim Veretekhin. The sources do not say how Stepan was killed, but given the state of his remains one can guess that a projectile from the tank ended his life.

The Ukrainians later interrogated Veretekhin, filmed the whole thing, and put it online for propaganda purposes. In the video, Veretekhin can be heard saying that he and his men were told that NATO was expanding, the Kyiv regime was persecuting Russians, and there was a need to rescue them. Operational leadership had also assured the spetsnaz that Kharkiv already was surrounded by Russian troops. Thus, everything would take place as bloodlessly as it had in Crimea. The men were under no circumstances to use violence against civilians and were to engage Ukrainian troops only if they fired first. Pressed by the Ukrainian interrogators on why he had come to their country in the first place, Veretekhin said his own leaders had deceived him. Since crossing the border he had not seen a single Ukrainian Nazi.

Back at the church in Gdov, there was anger among the mourners. Here, Kremlin propaganda stood on firmer ground. Svetlana, a friend of the family, could report that Stepan's parents continued to support the war despite the death of their son. As for herself, she was certain that this was a war of necessity. If Russia had not attacked Ukraine, surely Ukraine would have attacked Russia. Another woman in the crowd recalled a recent episode from the street: "The other day this lady came up to me. I had no idea she was from Ukraine. She started complaining: what did they have to go there for? I could have killed her. I told her: shut your mouth, you bitch!"

The only critical voice was Ivan. Himself a former military, he had served in the First Chechen War. Ivan complained that most of his fellow villagers were glued to the Russian propaganda channels. There was no point in having a discussion with them. He also questioned the competence of Russian military commanders: "There have been no changes to tactics for the last 30 years. As before, they continue to stupidly move in columns."

In fact, Ivan's criticism brings up a much larger point about Soviet and Russian special operations forces in general. What was Stepan and the other Spetsnaz GRU personnel doing on Shevchenko Street that morning in the first place? Are not such forces trained to operate clandestinely behind enemy lines to destroy targets of strategic significance? Why did they drive down a main avenue in a big city in broad daylight with markings clearly saying "Here comes the Russian army"?

The five Tigrs working their way down Shevchenko Avenue on 27 February 2022 actually illustrate a conundrum that has plagued the Soviet and later Russian SOF throughout their history. The other military branches most of the time have no idea what to do with them. There is no doubt that these forces on occasion have accomplished feats comparable to those of their Western counterparts, but again and again they have also been misused or forced to serve as gap-fillers when others could not do their jobs. This reality made one former Spetsnaz GRU officer and force chronicler, Sergei Kozlov, start his four-volume history of Spetsnaz GRU by denying that they really are special operations forces. "In actual fact and to my great regret," he wrote, "Russia never ever truly possessed special operations forces."[2]

Spetsnaz: A History of the Soviet and Russian Special Forces discusses the accuracy of this statement as well as numerous other factors that shaped the forces that once were feared as a scourge of the Western world. It is intended to inform both the general interested public as well as political and military decision makers about the history and status of one of Russia's most relevant military capabilities. Special operations forces, just like any other military capacity, are a product not only of current strategic demands but also of the path dependencies derived from their organizational and operational histories. How they look and what they are capable of today cannot be understood unless one knows where they came from.

Furthermore, while special operations forces in one form or another can be traced back at least to the emergence of standing armies

in the seventeenth century, there seems to be a historically unique demand for and interest in them today. As one study published in 2018 has argued, today "SOF are everywhere."[3] Such forces grew significantly in number from the late 1990s.[4] There are several possible explanations for this. One is that SOF may be an answer to decreased defense outlays. Even if the cost per soldier is high, SOF constitute a capacity that may achieve strategic and operational results with very small deployments. Another is that their light footprint is preferable. This is an advantage in an age when, at least in the West, the legal restraints on forces are tighter than before. Also, the media scrutiny is more intrusive. SOF can achieve results with less carnage than more regular and heavy deployments would. A third is that wars of antiterrorism and counterinsurgency until recently have dominated Western, but not only Western, warfare. Such operations created a particular demand for forces that were highly professional and left behind less destruction than heavier forces would have.

Likewise, even if the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine is shifting much of the focus away from counterinsurgency and back to war between states, this may not necessarily decrease the demand for SOF. Political and military leaders may continue to see SOF as the answer to many challenges in an era of renewed great-power competition. Philip Lohaus, for example, has argued that SOF are the best fit for conducting great-power competition in the gray zone between peace and war.[5] When great powers find that diplomacy is not enough and yet still shy away from open warfare, competition in the gray zone is an option.

As this book will demonstrate, the development of Soviet and later Russian SOF followed many of the same patterns as did Western SOF. The types of operations for which they trained and sometimes fought were similar, and the struggles and turf wars with other parts of the military bear much resemblance. However, there are also differences. Russian SOF's excessive deployment as light infantry instead of special

operators sets them apart. The same is true of their sometimes pivotal role in the potentially violent domestic power struggles that plague authoritarian regimes in particular. Furthermore, their experience in navigating the breakup of a superpower where political leadership at times was absent is somewhat unique. There are, for example, not many Western SOF units that have had to decide for themselves which country they should belong to. That happened to the 15th SzGRU Brigade in Chirchik in Uzbekistan after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Still, despite some historical oddities, there is little doubt that Russia now is at least as eager as its Western competitors to develop and strengthen their special operations forces. Western forces have already met them in Syria, and they may very well meet them again. That could take place on the opposite sides of some developing world conflict or, God forbid, in a direct confrontation. The February 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine is a stark reminder of this danger. Here, assisting Ukraine while simultaneously avoiding war between Russia and NATO is one of the main challenges.

This book uses a variety of sources, but the most important ones are the recollections of former spetsnaz soldiers and officers themselves. The published memoirs of 46 former spetsnaz soldiers and officers have been used, spanning the period from 1950 until the Russian war with Georgia in 2008. Thirty of these memoirs were published as single chapters or smaller fragments in the four-volume series *Spetsnaz GRU: Ocherki istorii* (Spetsnaz GRU: Studies in the history) published in 2009 and 2010 and edited by former Spetsnaz GRU officer Sergei Kozlov. These books contain well over 2,000 pages of personal spetsnaz memories in addition to Kozlov's comments and explanations. Currently, they constitute the single-most important publicly available source on the history of spetsnaz. Only the opening of archives at some unknown time in the future is likely to change that.

The remaining 16 memoirs come mostly from individually published spetsnaz veterans' autobiographies. In addition, I have used information from five autobiographies from former KGB operators (including some from Spetsnaz KGB), nine autobiographies written by officers from other parts of the Soviet and Russian armed forces who analyze from their own perspectives the performance of spetsnaz forces, as well as 13 book-length Russian-language scholarly studies on the history of spetsnaz.

It would probably be wrong to claim that this book is a disinterested and objective history of spetsnaz. That will not be possible until the archives open. Rather, it is the history of these forces as the men of spetsnaz themselves have seen it. One of the main advantages of using military memoirs as sources is that they rest on the "authority of lived experience."[6] Nevertheless, they are probably better seen as providers of secondary rather than primary data.[7] Largely written with a certain distance in time from the events themselves, they are vulnerable to lapses in memory, conscious and unconscious author omissions, and biases that the author may have picked up between the time of events and the time of writing.

In this book, the existence of observations and judgments from other parts of the Soviet and Russian militaries has enabled me to somewhat moderate the spetsnaz's own narrative. That independent look also includes a number of KGB sources. The existence of some spetsnaz-independent sources is the case for the 1950–1979 Cold War period and the 1979–1989 Afghanistan War period. Furthermore, it is especially true for the first post–Cold War period, that is, from 1990 to 2008. In that phase of Russia's development, there existed an extent of press freedom and investigative journalism in the country that allowed outsiders unprecedented peeks inside these secretive structures. Throughout the 2000s, however, this freedom of the press gradually eroded. By 2020, openness on the development and use of these forces had reverted to something resembling the late Soviet

period. Still, some useful information can be gleaned from progovernment or self-censored neutral media sources and social media accounts. In addition, the use of spetsnaz forces in Syria and Ukraine in particular enabled occasional reporting on the activities of these troops by non-Russian media. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, foreign media accounts, together with reports from Russian journalists reporting from abroad, have become more or less the only sources of information. Many of these journalists have still maintained their networks of information inside Russia.

Finally, while archival sources would have made an important addition, their superiority over memoirs is debatable. Stephen Kotkin, a historian of the Soviet Union, argues that, although archives can bring more certainty of factual matters compared to memoirs, in his experience they very seldom change conceptual thinking and larger conclusions. Based on his own extensive research in archives, he warns also that the content of official documents may be biased. For example, final content is often shaped by bureaucratic infighting. Furthermore, the policymaking that took place before the document was written is often not visible from the document.[8] The historian Yuval Hariri asserts that memoirs often supersede archival documents as sources on military command, culture, and mindset. In his words, memoirs bring forward the "real emotional world of peoples," in contrast to the "imaginary world of paper."[9] Finally, at least one effort has been made to test Soviet military memoirs for relative accuracy. The Israeli historians Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, gauging the accuracy of memoirs written by Soviet veterans from Soviet military interventions in the Middle East during the 1960s and 1970s against "other mutually independent accounts," found such memoirs to be "remarkably reliable."[10]

Before I present the structure of this book, one more clarification is needed on transliteration. The Russian term *spetsnaz* is generic. It is put together from two other Russian words, *spetsialnoe* (special) and

naznachenie (purpose/task/assignment) and can be used accurately in both singular and plural constructions. By itself it does not denote any particular force or military unit. There will be organizations both within and outside the Russian security establishment that call themselves "spetsnaz" but that are not specifically analyzed in this book. Some, such as the Sigma special forces of the Soviet border guards, will be mentioned when relevant, but the focus is on the units that fall within a Western understanding of what constitutes special operations forces. That is to say: those who belong to the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and those who in Soviet times belonged to the KGB and after the dissolution of that organization the FSB. In terms of military special operations forces specifically, I will discuss Spetsnaz GRU and the 45th SzVDV (Airborne) Brigade and the Special Operations Command (SSO). (The 45th was a regiment from 1994 until 2015, when it was expanded into a brigade.) In discussing Spetsnaz KGB and the successor Spetsnaz FSB, I address the Alpha and Vympel units.

Chapter 1 provides the background for the establishment of Spetsnaz GRU (formally known as Special Forces of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces) in the early 1950s. Here I explain how the forces evolved into the form they maintained throughout the Soviet period and well into the post-Soviet period. Their sometimes problematic relationship with other branches, initially the Russian navy but later also the Airborne forces, is illuminated in these passages. Their actual use in conflict was limited during this period, but from the late 1970s that started to change. The Soviet Union gradually more directly engaged in conflicts in the developing world, especially Africa. Spetsnaz played a significant role in some of those engagements. This was also the time when the Soviets started to train and educate cadres from the developing world. Instruction took place at bases inside the Soviet Union. The purpose was to speed up the fight for a world communist revolution. Primary

among these camps was the school of insurgency at Perevalnoe in Crimea.

Chapter 2 is fully dedicated to the role of spetsnaz in the Soviet war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Spetsnaz themselves view Afghanistan as their golden hour despite the fact that the Soviet Union lost that war much as Western forces did in the early 2020s. Nevertheless, spetsnaz, most other branches of the Soviet military, as well as the Soviet Union's Afghan, Pakistani, and Western enemies all agree that spetsnaz was the shining example among all Soviet forces participating in that war. The main problem, however, was that the political and military leaders in Moscow refused to see Afghanistan as anything but a sideshow. Thus, officers at home stubbornly refused to learn from the practical combat experience of those who fought abroad in Afghanistan. This turned out to be a huge mistake when the Kremlin, six years after Afghanistan, sent spetsnaz to yet another counterinsurgency, this time in Chechnya.

Next, chapter 3 describes how spetsnaz coped with the almost simultaneous falls of the communist regime and the Soviet Union itself. Three challenges in particular confronted the forces during this time. First, they were twice asked to engage violently on behalf of one side in the domestic struggle for state power. In both cases, they avoided bloodshed, but at least in the second case they came to suffer themselves for what the winning side saw as disloyalty. Second, they repeatedly ended up in situations where they sometimes made political decisions on behalf of Russian political authorities. Such was the case because no orders from Moscow were forthcoming or because orders that did come made no sense under the local conditions. Most of these episodes took place during the first phase of the civil war in Tajikistan (1992–1997). Finally, as in Afghanistan, spetsnaz became a crucial element of the fighting during Russia's two wars in Chechnya (1994–1996 and 1999–2009). All three challenges took place against the backdrop of an unprecedented decay in Russia's military power after the fall of communism. The Russian economy collapsed, and extreme

resource scarcity hit the military until oil prices started to rise again in the mid-2000s.

Chapter 4 starts with the short Russian war against Georgia in 2008. It goes on to illuminate what happened to spetsnaz during the radical military reforms that Minister of Defense Anatolii Serdiukov initiated just after that war, then portrays the role of spetsnaz in the new era of great-power competition. This new epoch gradually took hold after President Vladmir Putin's inflammatory rant against the West in Munich in 2007. Included in the discussion are the role of spetsnaz in the annexation of Crimea, the fomenting of armed rebellion against Kyiv in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and these forces' importance for Russia's participation in the civil war in Syria. The latter conflict is sometimes characterized as Russia's first American-style war. Such is likewise true for Russian special operations forces.

Finally, the epilogue traces some of the experience of spetsnaz in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. And yet no full accounting of the role of these forces in this war is possible, as the conflict was ongoing at the time of publication. As long as the conflict was still ongoing sources were too scarce and scattered to paint any kind of detailed portrait as with the other periods covered in this book.

To see how we got here, however, we need to return to the year 1951 and a young lieutenant named Evgenii Borisov.

1

PREPARING FOR A MAJOR WAR, 1950—1979

In January 1951, Lieutenant Evgenii Borisov was sent to the headquarters of the Soviet 5th Army in Spassk-Dalnii. This small city on the border with China is located about 180 kilometers north of Vladivostok in the Russian Far East. Borisov was there on a secret mission. Together with his superior, Major Rusinov, his job was to establish the 91st Special Forces Company. Later, a few additional officers of similar rank arrived to assist the two in their efforts. The 91st was to be one of 46 similar units spread out across the Soviet Union. Each company would consist of 120 troops: 10 officers, 10 sergeants, and the rest grenadiers and privates. The sergeants and grenadiers would sign contracts for three years at a time.[1] The new units were directly subordinated to the military districts in peacetime. However, they would be transferred to the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU, the Soviet/Russian military intelligence), for operational control in case of war. The new forces soon were called "spetsnaz," and the GRU was also in charge of the content for training and doctrines for deployment.

Since Borisov and the rest knew absolutely nobody in Spassk-Dalnii, and since they for reasons of secrecy could not just start recruiting young men off the streets, the only way to fill the 91st with troops was to pilfer the best from existing military units in the area. Identifying these prodigies turned out to be easy. All company headquarters had their own Lenin room. In this room, there would invariably be a poster with *Nashi otlichniki* (Our exemplary soldiers) glued to a wall. The small group of spetsnaz entrepreneurs simply went from Lenin room to Lenin room and scribbled down the

promising candidates' family names. Additionally, they would also have a look around to see if they could discern other promising candidates on the spot. When a list was ready, they checked all medical records and made sure the candidates were politically "clean" through the local counterintelligence operative office of the Ministry of State Security (which in 1954 became the KGB). Finally, they presented baffled company commanders with lists of people that they would like to take immediately. Faced with such brazenness, most company commanders would throw a fit and immediately complain to headquarters. For those situations, the spetsnaz had been issued a special phone number at the divisional command center. If local military authorities were recalcitrant when ordered to give up their best men to a project they had never heard about, Borisov was to present them with this number to call. And, obviously, most of them were recalcitrant. Giving up their top performers to some low-ranking officers without a word as to what they would be used for was a serious insult.[2] However, most commanders would calm down when divisional commanders responded that the highest levels in Moscow had sanctioned such "theft." Resentment of the special forces for "diluting the quality of the regular military" by picking off the best personnel is a familiar reality in many militaries.[3]

After cherry-picking talent, the next step was to find a location for the unit. Luckily, there was an abandoned military base in the neighboring village of Dubovskoe with a barracks, mess, and storage building. Next was a facility for parachute practice. This became Borisov's job. He was the only one on the team who had ever parachuted before. Since none of the newly enrolled knew what they were being recruited for, Borisov recalls that there initially was a strong need to conduct what he called "moral-psychological training." When the recruits started to suspect they would have to jump out of airplanes, many got cold feet.

Nevertheless, by August 1951 the 91st was ready to start jumping. At the same time, training manuals started to arrive from Moscow detailing more explicitly what spetsnaz should be able to do. Very specifically, all platoons in all 46 companies should train for inserting personnel deep into enemy territory to find any American "Little John" free-flight nuclear rocket artillery launchers. The time set aside for finding them was 36 hours, and then they were expected to destroy them within one and a half hours.[4] It was of course recognized that this would not always be possible. The platoons may have to stay behind enemy lines for longer periods than that, and they may also have to conduct other dangerous work including special reconnaissance or direct attacks against targets other than tactical nuclear launchers. However, the paramount priority was the Little Johns and, later, the US Pershing medium-range missiles in Europe.[5]

Rusinov was eventually assigned elsewhere, and Borisov became the logical successor as commander. Nothing, however, could be taken for granted. In December 1953, he was called to a meeting with the head of the military district, Lieutenant General Petr Koshevoi. Koshevoi, who had entered service at age 15. He fought in the Russian Civil War and in World War II, and he was an intimidating and hard man; everybody was afraid of him. When Borisov entered his office, Koshevoi transfixed him with his eyes. He then started slowly circling around Borisov to make up an impression. Finally, he yelled, "Sit!" Borisov knew he had passed the test: he would be next commander of the 91st Special Forces Company.

For hunting Little Johns, and similar missions, training for survival behind enemy lines was vital. In the winter of 1957, for example, the 91st was thrown into the Ussurian taiga for a week, no support provided, in temperatures that reached minus-35 Celsius with snow at their waists. Equipment included skis, but none of the radios worked; they were completely isolated. Their mission was to cross the Sikhote-Alinskii mountain range and conduct surveillance of a Chernigov

military airfield located in the valley beyond. Sikhote-Alinskii is home habitat of the Siberian tiger, and tiger-fear became an additional stressor. According to Borisov, all they heard one night was a tiger roar in the distance.

With the basic parachute training facilities and manuals in place, the next stage was shooting practice. The 91st, and probably most of the other 46 spetsnaz companies, became among the first to test out what was then one of the Soviet arms industry's most secret achievements: the Kalashnikov AK-47 automatic rifle. The demands for secrecy in handling this innovation were very strict. The gun could never be removed from its case other than for shooting practice, and after shooting every single empty cartridge had to be recovered and handed over to a controller one by one. When the magazine of a Kalashnikov was lost during shooting practice in the 100th spetsnaz company outside Kiev in Ukraine, the whole unit went into a state of shock. This initial secrecy worked, and the West became fully aware of the AK-47 and its potential only in the late 1950s.[6]

In remote Dubovskoe, it was relatively easy to maintain secrecy. However, the unit was fairly soon relocated to the more central town of Voroshilov-Ussuriisk. Here, housing facilities were far better. But secrecy became almost impossible. The base was located more or less in the center of town. Most likely, the leadership of the military district, who had ordered the transfer, had not fully grasped the nature of the new unit. To compensate for the loss of natural concealment, the district leadership provided the 91st with a cover story. They were to introduce themselves to civilian residents and the local military as a guard unit for divisional headquarters. However, when civilians and militaries alike started to see these "guards" descending in parachutes, nobody believed that alibi. Thus, after intense lobbying from Borisov and some other officers, the 91st was allowed to relocate yet again to another abandoned garrison, in the isolated village of Talovyi. Here, they could once more train free from onlookers.

In general, the Soviet efforts to keep spetsnaz secret were largely successful. In fact, although Western intelligence agencies had known for some time that the Soviet Union had special forces, it was not really until the Soviet defector Viktor Suvororv (real name Vladimir Rezun) published an article titled "The Soviet Union's Special Forces" in the American journal *Military Review* in 1984 that enough became known about them to have an impact on Western military planning. That was 34 years after being established.

In addition to parachuting, demolition work was a main priority for training. Here, however, education was complicated by the aftereffects of World War II. Few recruits, even among those selected for special duty, had more than four years of schooling. Many lacked even the most basic skills. For example, according to one of the first commanders of the 92nd SzGRU Company, Vladimir Breslavskii, many new recruits did not know the multiplication table. That was a problem for training in how to prepare of explosives. Thus, memorizing this table was the first they had to do.[7]

Another drawback was the system known as *khozsposob*. The word can loosely be translated as "self-reliance." In practice, it meant that military units would receive only the building materials instead of houses. They had to do the rest of the job themselves. Unfamiliar as most of the recruits were with artisan work, the house construction took a serious toll on the time available for military training. *Khozsposob* existed as a drag on spetsnaz professionalism well into the 1960s. Borisov remembers that, when he arrived several years later as head of staff for the 8th SzGRU Brigade in Iziaslav in western Ukraine, his brigade commander, a Colonel Beliadko, was well on his way to turning the whole unit into a "brigade of bricklayers and carpenters."[8] A serious conflict erupted between the two when Beliadko overturned Borisov's selections for new recruits. The former had replaced what Borisov judged to be promising fighters with any recruit he could find who had at least rudimentary artisan skills.

Some years after Iziaslav, in the early 1960s, Borisov moved again. This time he was appointed commander of the 43rd Spetsnaz Battalion in Lagodekhi in the Georgian Soviet Republic in the Caucasus. Most spetsnaz companies had by then gradually expanded into battalions, and from 1962 onward they would expand into full brigades. While benchmarks for missions and training were more or less standardized across different units, local conditions often proved decisive in determining to what degree officers would be able to bring units up to these standards. Without access to local resources, Borisov knew, he would achieve very little. Soon after his arrival in Lagodekhi, he was therefore thrilled to be invited to celebrate the Day of the Police in one of the better restaurants in the city. This festivity was by local standards a major happening. Most of those who had any say in the running of the city, civilian and military alike, would be there. Borisov realized that whether or not his command of the 43rd would be a success largely depended on the impression he was able to make on local power holders that night. As he himself recalls, rules and institutions counted for very little in the Caucasus in those days. Personal connections were imperative to solve most issues.[9] Contemplating how to make an impression, he knew, as all Russians do, that the ability to propose great toasts is one of the most revered skills in the Caucasus. Borisov furthermore suspected that a toast to Joseph Stalin would be particularly likely to excite. The Soviet Union's now-deceased First Secretary had been of ethnic Georgian origin. However, making such a tribute could also be dangerous. The year 1962 was the height of the de-Stalinization process, and all military personnel were under constant political surveillance by their own political officers and the KGB. Proposing a toast to the now officially disgraced leader took guts. Still, given how much depended on this toast, and given the fact that he could not think of anything else even remotely close in symbolic appeal, Borisov decided to go for it. After describing to the audience how, during a recent stationing in East Germany, he had seen the wise words of Stalin engraved on an obelisk

in Treptower Park in Berlin, he proposed a salute to the "distinguished Generalissimos of the Soviet Union, Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin!" The audience fell dead-silent. Borisov feared he had made the political mistake of his life. Then, the applause thundered. Someone took Borisov aside and ensured him that, after this gesture, every door in Lagodekhi would be open to him.

As explained above, the teams that originally spread out to all corners of the country to create spetsnaz companies had the full political and doctrinal support of Moscow. Most of the implementation, however, was up to people on the ground. For example, Moscow did little or nothing to coordinate spetsnaz interaction with other parts of the armed forces. The initiative rested with men like Borisov. In many cases, spetsnaz troops developed largely in isolation. Although Airborne troops and the air force provided assistance for parachute training, often that was the extent of it.

For example, although operational plans called for the insertion of spetsnaz units behind enemy lines by helicopter, nobody from the central offices in Moscow seemed to take any responsibility for making rotary aircraft available to the new units. Thus, when Borisov trained his troops for insertion behind enemy lines, he transported them to their designated locations by car, pretending it had taken place by helicopter. After some time in Lagodekhi, however, he discovered that, in Telavi, 80 kilometers away, there was actually a military helicopter detachment. When he contacted the commander of that unit, he found out that the helicopter pilots had trained on the same type of missions as his own men—only they had been flying with empty helicopters pretending there were spetsnaz in them. After formally asking for permission from the air force, the two units were able to start exercising jointly.

Inspired by the success with the helicopters, the industrious Borisov next reached out to the geographically even closer MiG-17 fighter aircraft regiment in Tsiteli-Tskaro. As it turned out, the

commander of that regiment had been training his pilots in bombing targets identified by forward air controllers. However, here also the training took place without any thought for the possibility that it might actually be possible to engage the whole process. The commander had merely issued his pilots random coordinates on a map and told them to pretend these were targets identified by forward air controllers. Borisov proposed that he instead send "a group of my men to the 'enemy rear,' they identify the coordinates of targets and send to you, and you immediately send two of your aircraft to simulate an attack." Unfortunately, the Soviet Union had not yet developed any special equipment for communication between forward air controllers and pilots. The air force commander, however, had at his disposal some mobile air force radios that his men normally used to land aircraft at spare airfields in cases where regular air control was absent. He now suggested training some of the spetsnaz operators on these radios. Thus, through the initiatives of Borisov and the fighter aircraft commander, a primitive form of spetsnaz and fighter aircraft cooperation grew from the bottom up in the Caucasian military district.

The exploits of Evgenii Borisov demonstrate how even a strategic decision, such as the one to create special operations forces, still often is in need of significant bottom-up initiative and ingenuity to work. Here, that was the case even with the full backing of the military and political leaderships. In fact, it was especially true in the case of the establishment of spetsnaz in the beginning of the 1950s. This is because creation of the new units took place against the background of a country still reeling from the destructions and scarcities created by the global war in the not-too-distant past.

SPETSNAZ—A STRATEGIC NECESSITY

The Kremlin mood was gloomy in the early 1950s. Nikita Khrushchev later recalled that Stalin had "trembled with fear" of a US attack on the Soviet Union.[10] Nerves were not much calmer on the other side of the East–West divide. The Western powers had an acute sense of conventional inferiority in Europe. They were sent into a deep shock by the outbreak of the Korean War. In this atmosphere, and as an attempt to counter the perceived Soviet conventional superiority, the United States decided to deploy mobile tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. The first units arrived already in the spring of 1952.[11]

It was the need to destroy these nukes early in case of war that triggered the Soviet Union to create special operations forces. The Soviets were already lagging behind the United States in the development of nuclear weapons delivered by aircraft. Now, with the new ground-based US nuclear deployments, they also felt that their conventional deterrent was in danger. Striking the new American nukes from afar in the case of an emergency seemed impossible, even with good intelligence. Soviet military leaders feared that, by the time the right people in Moscow had learned of the location of these systems, and a decision to bomb the installations from the air had been taken, the Western tactical nuclear missiles would already be aloft and on their way to striking Soviet targets. The only possible solution was to have people on the ground who could find and destroy these systems before they could launch.

There were also additional reasons for the establishment of spetsnaz, but the nuclear assignment was what set things in motion. The undeniable importance of this mission made sure the new units from the beginning had the full backing of the political and military leaderships. Still, the general acceptance that only special operations forces could do this job did not imply that everybody agreed on how much resources the new units should get or how autonomous they should be. Their strategic inevitability was not by itself enough to shield them from the rivalries inherent in other parts of the military.

In addition, and potentially even more troubling, their creation introduced extra nervousness into the political intrigues of the 1950s Kremlin. Spetsnaz was an indispensable strategic necessity, but it could also quickly become a dangerous wildcard in the Kremlin's political power games.

It was the Chief of the General Staff, General Sergei Shtemenko, and the head of GRU, General Matvei Zakharov, who had suggested that the Soviet Union create special operations forces to deal with US tactical nukes.[12] The idea took almost no time to be accepted, and Minister of Defense Aleksandr Vasilevskii on 24 October 1950 signed Directive Org/2/395832 confirming their establishment.

The destruction of US nuclear weapons in Europe was to remain the main mission for Spetsnaz GRU throughout the Cold War. In fact, training for this mission continued all the way until the beginning of the 2000s. This was so despite the fact that the Soviet Union and the United States signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 1987. This treaty did away with almost all of the weapons that provided the rationale for these missions. Military doctrinal inertia seems to have been the main reason why it took 15 years from the nukes' disappearance from Europe until spetsnaz removed their destruction from their doctrines.[13]

Thus, training for demolition work deep in enemy territory always took up most of spetsnaz's time. Still, this was never their only focus. From the very beginning, they also prepared for other types of missions. Sergei Kozlov lists these as "the reconnaissance of enemy concentrations of forces and important military objects deep behind enemy lines; sabotage against important objects and lines of communication in enemy rear areas and the general creation of panic and disorganization in this areas; the organization and leadership of national liberation movements; and the liquidation of the enemy's important military and political leaders."[14] The latter mission (for a brief period the responsibility of special Spetsnaz GRU units called

likvidatory, or "liquidators") was soon handed over to the Ministry of State Security (later the KGB). Today, however, when the GRU stands accused of organizing the attempted assassination of the Russian defector Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England, in 2018, this may suggest that some kind of GRU likvidatory are back. Also in the 1950s, the likvidatory only killed defectors.

Organizationally and doctrinally, the new Soviet special forces grew out of two preexisting military traditions: the Soviet Airborne forces (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voiska—VDV) since the early 1930s, and the partisan movements that had fought Germans troops in occupied Soviet territory during World War II. The former provided the new spetsnaz companies with a recruiting base and parachuting expertise. The latter, with experience in the organization of World War II partisan warfare, wrote the first spetsnaz doctrines and training programs. That was especially true for General Pavel Golitsyn, considered to be the father of Soviet special forces doctrine.

Golitsyn, a village boy from the Urals, served in the Red Army for 44 years. He fought in World War II from day one. His service in that war included heading the highly efficient partisan unit Chekist on the Byelorussian Front. He personally took part in armed combat for the last time on Ethiopia's side during the 1977–1978 Ogaden War against Somalia.[15] In terms of Spetsnaz GRU, Golitsyn is famous for being the author of two documents titled "Doctrine for the Use of Special Forces in Combat" and "Organization and Tactics of Partisan Movements."[16] He wrote them after taking over as head of the GRU's Department for Special Intelligence in 1963.[17] It is likely that much of the content, if not necessarily the same documents, was regulating the training of, and thinking on the use of, spetsnaz until the early 2000s. A more or less official GRU historical account confirms that spetsnaz regulatory documents did not change very much from their establishment until the early 2000s.[18]

In terms of the earlier VDV tradition, spetsnaz was also a response to the mixed Soviet experience with Airborne forces during World War II. Parachuting large units behind enemy lines, the original purpose of the Airborne forces had not paid off as well as anticipated. The two largest Airborne Soviet operations, Viazma and Dnepr, had been fiascos.[19] After descending, the forces fought well for only a few days. Subsequently, they became increasingly difficult to resupply. From this experience emerged the idea that it often may be better to parachute in only small forces. These would need much less logistical support, and they could more easily hide while still staying connected with the main force.[20] The utility of large airdrops is still questioned in Russia as well as in other big military powers despite the existence of forces that train for such missions.[21]

Another development boosted the preference for small rather than large airdrops: the rapid progress of missile technologies. Where missiles could hit, there would be less need to send in Airborne troops. Consequently, the expanding range of missiles changed the Soviet military understanding of what "deep behind enemy lines" meant. In the early 1950s, it meant about 100 kilometers into enemy territory. Just a few years later, because new missiles could now cover that distance, it expanded to about 500 kilometers.[22] This fivefold increase in the distance of supply lines meant it was even more important that the resupply needs of those dropped were as limited as possible.

A final reason for creating Spetsnaz GRU was the establishment of similar units on the other side of the Atlantic. In his memoirs, Golitsyn argues that the development of Soviet special forces was a response to the US development of the same capability. In effect, Golitsyn claims, "the Americans dragged us into a race to build special forces in the same way they dragged us into most other arms races."[23] In his view, the Americans had just been better than the Soviets in learning from their own and others' successful efforts during World War II to insert small groups behind enemy lines. There is, however,

reason to question Golitsyn's arms-race explanation. Given that the two sides established special operations forces roughly simultaneously, it is difficult to argue that one stimulated the other. In the United States, their creation was primarily a response to operational needs in the Korean War (1950–1953).[24] On the Soviet side, the main reason was those mobile tactical US nuclear weapons. Yet it may be true, since the Soviets may have known about the American plans for establishing SOF, that this became an additional incentive for Moscow.

In the years 1950 to 1952, there was a slow expansion of Spetsnaz GRU. However, already in 1953 the General Staff suddenly cut its numbers from the original 46 companies to 11. This was an early demonstration that they were far from untouchable. True, the reductions were part of a sizable general reduction in troops across the Soviet military. But the particularly high reduction in spetsnaz units implies that a full appreciation of SOF as a concept had not yet permeated the top brass.[25] Furthermore, the military leadership suggested that responsibility for spetsnaz force production should shift from the GRU to the army. If that happened, it would be a signal to them and the rest of the military that they were no longer seen as a strategic capacity. This was an early precursor to the actual but short-lived subordination of army spetsnaz to the regular army during the so-called Serdiukov reforms of the late 2000s. In 1953, however, the GRU fought the transfer plans and won. It argued that, if such a resubordination took place, then in time the spetsnaz units would become no different from regular army intelligence units.[26] Spetsnaz numbers were cut, but autonomy remained. It was not until the famous Marshal Gerogii Zhukov returned to the military leadership in 1957 that the new forces started to secure better footing.

Zhukov, a proud and self-assertive soldier of poor peasant background, was the most important Soviet military leader during World War II. After the war, in 1946, he was appointed commander in chief of Soviet

ground forces. However, only three months into that appointment, he was demoted by Stalin to a provincial position, commander of the Odessa military district. Most likely, this was because of Stalin's own envy and resentment. Zhukov was enormously popular among the Soviet people, and Stalin always seemed to be suspicious that the military posed a threat to his power.[27] Furthermore, during the storming of Berlin, Zhukov had gone directly against Stalin's orders. The latter had ordered Zhukov to arrive in the company of two tank armies when he met the Soviet Union's Western allies on the Elbe. The purpose was to make clear to these allies that they should not try to go farther east. Zhukov, however, thought the tank armies would be better utilized surrounding Berlin to prevent Nazis from bringing in reinforcements. Doing it his own way, Zhukov was able to conquer Berlin in only 10 days. Still, his decision, no matter how successful, was a slap in the face to Stalin, who found it hard to forget.[28] Nevertheless, after Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev rehabilitated Zhukov and made him minister of defense.

In addition to Zhukov, Sergei Shtemenko, one of the two who had first proposed the idea of spetsnaz, was still around. He had in 1953 taken a serious hit to his career because of supposed associations with the recently deposed and then executed head of the secret police, Larentii Beria. Shtemenko was lowered in rank from general of the army to lieutenant general and sent off to head the Siberian military district. Still, by 1956 he had made his way back to Moscow and became head of the GRU. Furthermore, Shtemenko's deputy was one of the Soviet Union's most experienced organizers of partisan movements, the legendary Khadji-Umar Mamsurov. Thus, with the elevation of Zhukov to the position of minister of defense, there was now a strongly pro-spetsnaz team at the very top of the Soviet military.

Mamsurov is one of the most colorful individuals in the early spetsnaz. The partisan was an ethnic Osset from the northern

Caucasus. He joined the Red Army at 15. From then on, his was a life of combat. He first fought in the Russian Civil War (1917–1922). Later, he was sent to assist in organizing partisan movements in support of Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). There he met the American author Ernest Hemingway. Mamsurov was at the time working under the cover of a Macedonian revolutionary with the call-sign "Ksanti." He informed Hemingway about the ways of partisan warfare, and these meetings may have been one of the inspirations for Hemingway's later famous novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.[29] Some think Mamsurov was the model for the book's main hero, Robert Jordan. After Spain, Mamsurov went on to help lead a famous Soviet skiing company in the Winter War against Finland (1939–1940). During World War II, he rose to division commander. Finally, in 1956 he headed the unit that crushed the anticommunist opposition in the cities of Debrentse, Mishkoltse, and D re during the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

In the aftermath of World War II Mamsurov was one of the most battle-hardened soldiers in the Soviet armed forces. Still, the 1956 Hungary operation may have gotten to him. The whole thing led to bloodshed, which the Soviet leadership wanted to avoid.[30] Around 2,500 people died and more than 20,000 were wounded. Mamsurov's great-granddaughter, Margarita Ernandes, claims that it was common knowledge in the family that Mamsurov had a hard time getting over the bloodshed in Hungary. According to her, Mamsurov played an important role in opening Hungarian borders for anticommunists to escape to Austria.[31] He probably did this in an effort to limit the bloodbath. Still, the Hungarian experience did not prevent him from actively leading the development of Spetsnaz GRU for almost 10 years. He did this despite suffering several heart attacks during this period.

In early 1957, the Zhukov–Shtemenko–Mamsurov triumvirate expanded eight of the 11 remaining companies into battalions. Each battalion now had a little over 300 operators. That increased the total

size of Spetsnaz GRU from about 1,400 to about 2,000 troops. They were also able to prolong the conscript period from two to three years. While Zhukov and Shtemenko in particular secured spetsnaz in terms of numbers and autonomy, Mamsurov took responsibility for organizational development. In fact, Mamsurov did not leave his position as deputy head of the GRU with responsibility for the special forces until 1968.

Spetsnaz GRU initially thrived with Zhukov as minister. In August 1957, however, the World War II hero made a move that would have serious negative consequences not only for himself but also for spetsnaz. It was the first time that spetsnaz loyalty in a case of political leadership infighting became an issue. In that month, Zhukov signed an order to create a separate training school for spetsnaz officers in Tambov, a city 460 kilometers southeast of Moscow. Thus far spetsnaz officers had received their training at the VDV officer school in Ryazan. However, spetsnaz–VDV relations were never easy. The VDV officers in Ryazan, largely because of spetsnaz secrecy, became suspicious of their new colleagues. And spetsnaz often felt they were the victims of VDV prejudice. Thus, strained relations with the VDV, as well as the need to fully develop their own training at a place where they could maintain absolute secrecy, argued for the establishment of a separate school for spetsnaz officer training. Zhukov even ordered the air force to designate a regiment of transport aircraft specifically to be at the service of this new school. He stated that the GRU should have the right to require aircraft from this regiment at any time it desired.[32]

The years after Stalin's death in 1953 were extremely volatile at the top of Soviet politics. As already mentioned, the head of the secret police, Lavrentii Beria, was toppled and shot in 1953. This affair was part of Nikita Khrushchev's fight to become the new First Secretary. Although Khrushchev's hold on his position seemed secure by 1957, he and others were still alert to the possibility that powerful rivals might

emerge. The popular hero of World War II, Marshal Zhukov, was an obvious candidate.

Several Russian historians of spetsnaz argue, based on the record, that Soviet and later Russian political leaders have, for reasons of political survival, tended to be skeptical of what one of them called "very qualified experts on small wars."[33] The loyalty of small elite units may often turn out to be crucial during periods of political turmoil. According to one international study, military units that can move with speed and stealth are sometimes key if domestic power struggles become violent.[34] Few other parts of the military can compete with special forces in that regard. Zhukov's plans for the Tambov training center probably looked to Kremlin heavyweights as an attempt to establish such an "expert unit." It was created far enough from Moscow to make oversight difficult, but still close enough that dedicated air assets could bring them to the capital in no time.

Thus, when Zhukov failed to inform the rest of the Politburo about his decision to establish the new school in Tambov, all hell broke loose. There was fear that Zhukov was planning to oust the other Kremlin leaders by force. Mamsurov had innocently revealed Zhukov's Tambov plans to his friend General Haik Tumanian. Tumanian was married to the sister of Politburo member Anastas Mikoian's wife. Thus, when Mikoian heard from Tumanian about the plans, he immediately asked the general whether such forces could be "launched from the air to take control over the Kremlin."[35] Tumanian answered that in principle they could; Mikoian went straight to Khrushchev. As a result, the Central Committee of the Communist Party was called to an extraordinary plenary session in October 1957. Not to give away the real purpose of the meeting, the Central Committee members were told only that they were to discuss "the improvement of party-political work in the Soviet army and fleet." At the meeting, however, Second Secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Suslov and Khrushchev lashed out at Zhukov. Suslov called Zhukov's initiative illegal, and

Khrushchev scolded him for keeping the Tambov school a secret. A few days later, Zhukov was dismissed and publicly ostracized. Shtemenko and Mamsurov managed to preserve their positions, but Mamsurov was marked by what had happened. In fact, for him the episode was a tragedy. Not only had his innocent conversation with his friend Tumanian set the process in motion; the issue of a separate training school for spetsnaz officers was now shelved more or less for good.

Thus, most spetsnaz officers would continue to be educated at the VDV school in Ryazan. In 1962, however, as a partial compensation for Tambov, the 161st Center for the Training of Officers in Intelligence was established in Moscow. The mission seems to have been training in intelligence work for spetsnaz and retraining personnel from other services for the same type of work. According to Irek Murtazin, the 161st was derided as the "GRU cave" among troops.[36] In 2019, the *New York Times* claimed, based on Western intelligence sources, that the GRU had established a military unit numbered 29155 to conduct assassination and destabilization operations in Europe.[37] This included the March 2018 poisoning of the GRU defector Sergei Skripal in Salisbury. The five-digit military identification number for the 161st is indeed 29155. Based on the fact that the 161st is well known and has existed for a long time, the *Times* allegations were questioned by Russian specialists.[38] However, there need not be a contradiction here. A subunit for what are called "wet jobs" (assassinations) can easily be located within a well-known center that has unrelated outward responsibilities.

Mamsurov continued to work on the development of spetsnaz also after the Tambov affair, but then the appointment of Ivan Serov as the new head of GRU in 1958 again made life difficult for him. Serov had just been dismissed as head of the KGB because Khrushchev found him disloyal, and the military did not welcome him either.[39] According to M. N. Zalesskaia, his image as KGB executioner followed him to the

new job. He demonstrated little understanding for or interest in military intelligence, and everybody understood that he was not in this new post to achieve anything but finishing his period of service.[40]

Then everything changed again. In March 1963, the Byelorussian General Petr Ivanovich Ivashutin was appointed new head of the GRU. Ivashutin, the son of a railway worker from Brest-Litovsk with a phenomenal memory, was to remain GRU chief for the next 24 years. This was longer than anybody, before or after. Not all GRU commanders have been great friends of spetsnaz, but Ivashutin was. According to two of his biographers, he "devoted the special forces unwavering attention throughout his service as head of the GRU. He fully understood their importance and the acute necessity of maintaining such a capacity to meet the country's security challenges at that time. Their continued development was a major concern for him to the last day of his service."[41] Former GRU officers Vladimir Karpov and Iurii Babaiants point out that other parts of the military would often question the need for spetsnaz. When that happened, Ivashutin became stern. He would never let anyone touch these forces.[42] Ivashutin's long reign cemented spetsnaz as a military capability different from army and navy tactical intelligence. Their GRU subordination and autonomy versus the other branches of the military were not really questioned again until the Serdiukov reforms at the end of the 2000s.

Ivashutin came from a top position in the KGB. In contrast to his predecessor, Serov, he was happy to exchange the KGB for the GRU. He had over the years become increasingly disappointed with life in the higher echelons of the security service. This was mostly because of what he saw as incompetent KGB leadership. In particular, he disliked Alexander Shelepin (chairman of the KGB from 1958 to 1961) and Vladimir Semichasnyi (chairman of the KGB from 1961 to 1967).[43] Neither one had risen through the KGB ranks. They had absolutely no

prior experience in intelligence work when they arrived, owing their KGB appointments to rapid ascents as party apparatchiks.[44] The Communist Party would on occasion make such appointments to ensure that the KGB remained within the control of the Party. Thus, Ivashutin's disappointment with the KGB made him do what the famous SzGRU commander Vladimir Kvachkov later called an "unbelievable act" in the context of the Soviet system. He refused to see the GRU as secondary to the KGB.[45] According to Jonathan Haslam, Ivashutin "did nothing to facilitate close cooperation [between the KGB and the GRU], even to the detriment of the common cause."[46]

Ivashutin became head of the GRU at 53 and served until he was 77. He would probably have served even longer if not for the Mathias Rust affair. A young German, Rust embarrassed the Soviet leadership by landing a small Cessna airplane in Red Square in 1987.[47] Ivashutin was dismissed the same year as a part of a general cleanup among the military top brass after the humiliation.

A determined but accessible and modest man, Ivashutin probably demonstrated a combination of professionalism and avoidance of controversy that helped him keep the chair for so long. His deputy Igor Popov reminisced in an interview in 2004 that Ivashutin, despite his high place among the Soviet privileged elite—or "nomenclatura," as it was called—throughout his life drove the same humble Volga auto that he bought in the early 1950s. He did at one time procure a cottage in the countryside by selling a number of vintage guns that had he had received as gifts, as well as his wife's and daughter's fur coats, but that seems to have been the end of his extravagances. Popov pointed out the irony in the fact that at the time (2004), next to Ivashutin's derelict cottage stood the luxury three-story mansion of one of his successors.[48]

FINDING THEIR FORM

From the early 1960s up to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Spetsnaz GRU found their form and place within the Russian military structure. Much of the Spetsnaz GRU that we still see today, in terms of structure, training, and doctrine, was institutionalized over those 20-plus years. Moreover, with some partial exceptions due to expanding Soviet military engagement in the developing world from the late 1970s onward, spetsnaz did not engage in direct combat until that invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The service, like all the other branches and services in the Soviet military, was set up and trained primarily for major war with the West. The period saw developments in the number of spetsnaz; in their place in the Soviet command structure; in terms of experimentation with technologies and tactics; in their gradually more troubling relations with the VDV; in their focus on the training of partisan units; and in becoming slightly less SOF and more elite infantry.

There was a significant expansion in the number of spetsnaz. The reason was partly that the military wanted more people prepared to operate behind enemy lines in case of war, and partly that the Soviet leaders renewed their faith in the utility of partisan forces in a major war. Such forces had been out of fashion for a long time despite their considerable achievements during World War II. For spetsnaz, training the leadership of partisan forces grew to become a task of almost equal importance to the destruction of the US tactical mobile nuclear weapons. In addition, experience showed that the company unit was too small to cope with recruitment, training, and maintaining combat-readiness of a conscription-based force. For all these reasons, expanding first to battalions and then in 1962 to brigades was seen as necessary.

By the beginning of 1964, army spetsnaz consisted of 10 brigades (4,380 men in total), five battalions (1,586), and 11 companies (1,284).

All military districts bordering a foreign power would have a spetsnaz brigade, and those that did not would have a spetsnaz battalion. All told, in their cadre version, army spetsnaz consisted of 7,250 troops.[49] This expansion went even further in the 1970s.[50] In 1977, their number had increased to 23 spetsnaz units of different types. These totaled 8,039 troops in their cadre versions but could expand up to 44,845 in time of war.[51]

The system of subordination was also adjusted with the introduction of brigades. They now became simultaneously subordinated to the military district in which they resided and GRU headquarters in Moscow, both in peace and in wartime. The GRU in Moscow was responsible for doctrines, training, armaments, and personnel policy including promotion, but operatively the units were part of the intelligence section of the military district. In the case of war, each military district would turn into what was now called a "front." The spetsnaz brigades would provide their front with the necessary special reconnaissance as well as other tasks such as destroying enemy tactical nuclear weapons. Furthermore, military leadership foresaw the problem that few regular force officers would be able to see: the difference between spetsnaz and regular army intelligence units. Thus, the additional direct subordination to GRU in Moscow was there to ensure that the military districts did not turn their spetsnaz units into regular army reconnaissance. To help with this, GRU headquarters would in case of war dispatch officers as liaisons to the relevant front headquarters to form "special reconnaissance cells" as parts of these headquarters' overall intelligence capacity.[52] In this way, the General Staff hoped to make sure that the military districts would use the spetsnaz units in accordance with spetsnaz-specific doctrines and training, not those of the regular army.

The so-called cadre (*kadrirovannie*) units consisted in peacetime only of the cadre (officers and noncommissioned officers [NCOs]) and those who at any particular time were serving their conscription. This

meant that in peacetime only 10–15 percent of a full spetsnaz brigade would be serving at any one time.[53] Each brigade would therefore on a daily basis be no larger than 200–300 troops. During mobilization for war, however, they would rapidly expand to more than 2,500.[54] This system was the same as in most of the rest of the Soviet armed forces, but the General Staff seems at some point to have recognized that spetsnaz, at least in principle, should have been different. In the latter half of the 1970s, the General Staff managed to man the spetsnaz brigades with roughly 60–80 percent of prescribed personnel in peacetime.[55]

In terms of the quality and experience of soldiers, the conscript-based system meant that normally only officers and sergeants would have more than three years of service. Most of their time would have been dedicated to training soldiers who then soon left. Additionally, as seen in the case of Evgenii Borisov, the soldiers would have spent considerable time while in service doing things other than training for combat. Some of those who served later admitted that the training level of Soviet spetsnaz was not impressive.[56] Spetsnaz GRU until today at least partly relied on intakes of conscripts. But in October 2019 the Russian General Staff announced that from then on they would recruit only contract soldiers for spetsnaz.[57] The General Staff has given similar promises before, and whether this succeeds this time remains to be seen.

As for recruitment, spetsnaz did not develop standardized selection criteria until 1969, and even these were not very specific. General Staff Directive M11/104170 said that new recruits should display convincing moral and political reliability, have a high work ethic, and possess strong physical traits. Additionally, they had to have completed at least eight years of basic schooling.[58]

As demonstrated by Borisov's case, spetsnaz started recruiting by siphoning off talent from other branches and services—especially Airborne forces. There was no prohibition against recruiting from

elsewhere, but the Airborne troops were clearly the ones with the most compatible skills. Ivan Shchelokov recalls that, when he was ordered to expand his spetsnaz battalion into the 2nd SzGRU Brigade in the Leningrad military district in 1962, his only option was to filch the best cadres from the 76th Airborne Division in Pskov. According to Shchelokov, the commander of that division "did not exactly meet me with sweet words" when he understood what was about to take place.[59] Such pilfering of talent did nothing to improve the popularity of spetsnaz among Airborne officers. Furthermore, the practice seems to be continuing even today. A retired Spetsnaz GRU instructor, Sergei Badiuk, said as late as 2018 that spetsnaz still has "the right to hand-pick any soldier from any other unit" within the Russian military.[60]

The right to steal the best soldiers from other services meant that spetsnaz usually got the soldiers they wanted. There was, however, one quality-diminishing phenomenon that even the advantaged spetsnaz could not overcome. The men used the term *volosatiki* (parasites). These were the sons of higher military and party officials, and the recruiting commissions admitted them into prestigious units outside regular competition. N. V. Gubanov recalls the resentment he himself felt against the volosatiki when he applied for spetsnaz officer training in the mid-1970s.[61] The competition was already fierce, with 21 applicants for each place. The volosatiki came on top of that. This unfairness certainly did not increase the other applicants' trust in the institution they had just entered. A further irritant was that many of the privileged seem to have been shielded from especially dangerous missions. A former naval spetsnaz officer, Aleksandr Derzhavin, is biting in his criticism of the differences: "I want to emphasize here, that no children of Communist Party leaders or representatives of the Soviet cultural elite took part in combat abroad in order to do their international duty. . . . Fighting and dying in for example Angola, Egypt, Mozambique, Ethiopia or Afghanistan was reserved for the

children of the common people."[62] The special treatment of elite children in the Soviet Union was no secret, and military institutions were no exception.

Spetsnaz training included experimentation. That was true especially for parachuting. In the 1970s, the Soviet Union made a serious effort to develop new and better parachutes. Spetsnaz decided to test these to the limit. B. G. Goloida became the first person in the world to descend inside a parachuted armored personnel carrier (APC). In July 1986, Colonel V. D. Pozdniakov set a world record by parachuting from a plane at only 50 meters above ground level. His colleagues Sergei Galaev and Evgenii Demin successfully jumped from only 80 meters with weapons and full gear.[63]

Conscripts and sergeants, at least initially, received all their training in the units. The first platoon was usually the sergeant-training platoon. For the sergeants this was the case until 1973, the year a special training center for spetsnaz sergeants was established in Pechori near Pskov in western Russia. This center was joint army-navy spetsnaz. More than 10 years later, in March 1985, a special training center for spetsnaz sergeants going to Afghanistan was established in Chirchik, a small town outside Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Here, sergeants underwent three to four months of mission-specific training before being sent across the border into Afghanistan. The Pechori center was in operation until 1999, when spetsnaz reverted to the old practices of sergeant training within units.[64]

As already mentioned, the VDV and spetsnaz have not always coexisted well, with reoccurring squabbles between the two continuing today. It could be said that the Airborne forces helped giving birth to a child they on occasion later came to resent. In addition to the talent theft, officer educational cohabitation seems to have been the main cause of antipathy. As mentioned above, because of the Zhukov Tambov scandal, the main institution for Spetsnaz GRU officer training in Russia has mostly been the VDV Higher Guards Airborne

Command School in Ryazan. In 1968, this school opened the 9th Company. This was no company unit in the ordinary sense but rather a special training course for spetsnaz officers separate from the schooling received by Airborne officers. The Ryazan commanders were ordered to transfer 30–40 of the best individuals from each Airborne intake into the 9th. Obviously that was never popular, and not all commanders adhered to the instruction. The VDV would lose the cream of each intake crop to another service, and those who did not go to the 9th were marked as not among the best. According to Sergei Kozlov, some of the Ryazan commanders instead used the 9th Company as an opportunity to get rid of lazy cadres.[65] Furthermore, since spetsnaz were always "guests" at this school, they were never in a position to develop their educational capacity exactly as they would have preferred.

Cohabitating policies had long-term negative consequences. First, the school's leadership and the Airborne cadets seem to have treated the cadets of the 9th with suspicion. According to Sergei Kozlov, there was often a lot of "airborne chauvinism" toward spetsnaz. The VDV cadets would, for example, derogatorily call the spetsnaz cadets "indoor rangers." This was because they spent so much time in the classroom studying languages.[66] One Ryazan school commander, Aleksei Chikrizov, saw the 9th as an unwanted stepchild and tried to have the company closed down.[67] Still, truth be told, it may not only have been the Airborne troops that felt superior; the selection procedure for the 9th probably boosted the self-image of spetsnaz. One example is the bragging from the first commander of the 15th SzGRU Brigade in Chirchik in Uzbekistan, N. I. Lutsev, underscoring the difference between Airborne forces and spetsnaz: "If I am Airborne, it means I have to be able to take down two or three enemies at the same time. However, if I am not only Airborne, but Airborne-spetsnaz, it means I have to be able to take down from five to six enemies at the same time."[68] Hubris is a constant danger in elite units such as SOF. That is

the reason why the founder of the British SAS special forces, David Stirling, wrote this in his 1989 address to the SAS sergeants: "Let me remind you that you must never think of yourselves as elite. To do so would be bad for you and for your relations with the army and it would undermine those splendid qualities to which you are wedded."[69]

Second, another cause of VDV–spetsnaz discord was that discipline among spetsnaz often did not meet the standards of the VDV. Kozlov remembers that the most legendary of all VDV commanders, General Vasilii Margelov, would always say that at Ryazan he had only eight school companies.[70] He always left out the unruly 9th. This was a standing reproach for disorder and nonconformity. Similar to most special operations forces around the world, spetsnaz to some extent encouraged unconventionality if not outright disobedience. One commander of the 9th, Ivan Selukov, in an attempt to explain which types of personalities that fit spetsnaz, said that "the ones who steal apples in the collective farm's garden and get away with it are the ones who become spetsnaz."[71]

Third: the Ryazan school did not graduate enough officers to fill all vacancies in the rapidly expanding spetsnaz structure. This was especially the case after the enlargement of spetsnaz in the 1960s and 1970s. Because of the deficiency in Ryazan-educated cadres, Spetsnaz GRU also started to recruit officers from the intelligence section of the Kiev Higher Joint Command College. This college trained officers in intelligence for the regular army. Those recruits, however, had for obvious reasons not received an education tailored to special operations needs. The former spetsnaz officer Andrei Bronnikov recalls that the difference in educational background led to a constant, low-level confrontation within the service between Kiev and Ryazan graduates.[72] Those educated at Ryazan saw themselves as more genuine special operations officers compared to those from Kiev. Bronnikov also points out that there were noticeable differences between the two groups in their devotion and career expectations. The graduates of the

Ryazan school tended to identify more closely with spetsnaz. And much like special forces officers from, for example, the United States and Britain during the Cold War, graduates of Ryazan did not expect to have many career opportunities outside their own service.[73] Kiev's graduates, with their broader military experience and education, tended to see service in spetsnaz as only a stepping stone to higher positions in other services.[74]

In 1978, spetsnaz was granted an equivalent of the 9th Company at the staff college level. The Frunze Academy set up a separate course for spetsnaz officers within the intelligence faculty. This fact added legitimacy to the notion of special operations as something that was permanent and yet different from what other parts of the military were doing. Some may have hoped that the collection of officers teaching this course could evolve into an intellectual nucleus for innovation and development within spetsnaz. This could have ameliorated a lack of spetsnaz theory. However, there are few indications of such a development.[75] The former spetsnaz officer Sergei Kozlov, for one, is especially critical of the level of intellectual creativity among the spetsnaz training staff at Frunze. He remembers resenting having to study tactical military intelligence operations that were useless to him as a SOF commander. Furthermore, he found the learn-and-repeat pedagogy of the academy antithetical to the more independent mindset encouraged in spetsnaz: "After somewhat over a year of study at the Academy I had become completely convinced that any, even the most genial and non-traditional solution to a problem, was doomed if it contravened the teacher's already prepared answer. Independence of thought was unwelcome because unexpected propositions from the class would prevent the teachers from conducting their lessons according to plan."[76]

The concept of partisan units received a renewed focus from the Soviet leadership in the early 1960s. International tensions were on the rise, and some of those who had organized partisan movements during

World War II reminded Soviet leaders of a fatal mistake made in 1938. At that time, all pro-Soviet partisan units as well as their weapons storages were destroyed by Soviet authorities. In 1938, these types of units were not in line with the dominating forward defense doctrine (quickly absorb the enemy's attack and then bring the war to his territory). Furthermore, Stalin had been afraid that less tightly controlled but still armed partisan units could be exploited by enemies of the communist regime. Many of those who organized partisan units in the early 1930s disappeared during the 1937–1939 purges of Red Army personnel.[77] However, the former partisan leader Grigorii Linkov wrote a letter directly to the Central Committee explaining what catastrophic consequences the 1938 decision carried for the early part of the Soviet war effort.[78]

Linkov and others proved convincing. In August 1961, the party Central Committee adopted a resolution "on the preparation of cadres and the development of special technologies for the organization and equipment of partisan organizations." The plans arranged for the establishment of partisan organizations in the "rear areas of capitalist countries."[79] This included territory the Soviet Union had occupied as well as territory it might later occupy.[80] The Soviet leaders were confident that at least parts of the "oppressed workers of the capitalist world" would be on their side in case of conflict. Interestingly, one of the first missions for the newly created US special forces in the early 1950s anticipated the Central Committee's 1961 resolution: they were to prepare for partisan warfare in Soviet-occupied territory.[81] Most of the Soviet training effort would fall on spetsnaz, and the new mission came to greatly impact spetsnaz organization and training. A leading role for spetsnaz was only natural, since "the organization and leadership of national liberation movements" had in principle been part of the spetsnaz portfolio from the start.[82]

The other spetsnaz missions were not forgotten, but, according to Pavel Golitsyn, to educate a spetsnaz mobilization reserve of experts in

partisan warfare indeed became very important.[83] According to Aleksei Sukonkin, the rest of the military in the 1960s gradually came to see spetsnaz as "reservists for the creation of partisan movements in case of war."[84]

The new partisan priority also meant that instruction in foreign languages increased in importance. This had always been part of spetsnaz training, mostly limited to one or two double classes per week. Commanders increased the time set aside for language training substantially, and all spetsnaz units now received language-lab booths to increase learning efficiency. While we must assume that such new measures increased spetsnaz language proficiency, there is still reason to doubt how capable many of the operators actually became.[85] In addition to foreign-language training, a further measure to ensure that spetsnaz would be able to communicate with partisans in capitalist countries was to take advantage of the few cases where those partisans spoke a language close to the mother tongue. Thus, ethnic Azeri and Gagauz spetsnaz would in case of war be sent into Turkey to create partisan units there, and ethnic Tadjik spetsnaz would be ready for Afghanistan and Iran.[86]

In addition to spetsnaz becoming more numerous, they also became more conventional. Training had greater focus on reconnaissance in force (*razvedka boem*) than before, and concealment was no longer a sacred goal.[87] Taking all these developments together, one can suggest that army spetsnaz over the 20 years prior to the war in Afghanistan gradually moved from being typical special operations forces to becoming something closer to elite light infantry.

SOVIET FROGMEN

The establishment of naval special operations forces happened relatively soon after the creation of the army equivalents. The two

forces, however, have lived mostly separate lives. The frogmen's subordination to and integration with the Soviet navy was arguably stronger in the Soviet Union than in most Western countries. Tellingly, while army spetsnaz have always called themselves "Spetsnaz GRU," the naval units have mostly called themselves Spetsnaz VMF (Voenno-Morskoi Flot, i.e, the navy). That is so despite the fact that naval spetsnaz, at least formally, were as much a part of the GRU as their army colleagues.[88]

Furthermore, the circumstances surrounding the creation of army and naval spetsnaz could hardly have been more different. The formation of army spetsnaz was an initiative from the top military leadership to solve a specific and urgent strategic problem: the deployment of American mobile nuclear weapons in Europe. The formation of naval spetsnaz, by contrast, was a bottom-up initiative pushed forward by a few enthusiasts in the face of strong opposition. The resistance came from navy leadership.[89] Later, the admirals came to view naval spetsnaz as a valued asset. However, during the first 10 years belief in their necessity was far less compared to army spetsnaz. It should be noted that negative attitudes to frogmen was not unique to the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. H. I. Sutton points out in his 2016 book *Covert Shores* that this period in general "was a difficult time for naval special forces."[90]

The kickoff had come already in July 1945, when the head of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, Sergei Kruglov, thought he had a good idea. In connection with the Soviet occupation of parts of defeated Nazi Germany, his ministry had come into possession of German technology developed for diver underwater warfare. Not only did Kruglov sit on these pieces of fascinating foreign technology; he also had in prison the German head engineer for this technology (with the family name Neumeyer). Neumeyer had during the war led German military intelligence's research into equipment for frogmen.[91] Kruglov probably assumed that the Navy Staff would be very excited

about what he had to offer. He was sadly mistaken. The head of the Navy Staff, Admiral Ivan Isakov, was not in the slightest intrigued. According to him, military frogmen had no future prospects whatsoever. He was convinced that the range of types of missions they might execute was limited. Isakov also expected their efficiency to be exceptionally low. He had no doubt that the enemy would find and defeat them at a very early stage in conflict.[92] Thus, the navy rejected Kruglov's offer out of hand. The already-existing intelligence units of the Naval Infantry were seen as more than sufficient for the reconnaissance required in case the Soviet Union would need to land forces from sea. Furthermore, after army spetsnaz was established, navy leadership maintained that the army could handle any operations deeper into enemy territory than those for which Naval Infantry intelligence units were equipped and trained.[93] There was absolutely no need to create a separate naval capacity.

Despite this hostile reception, the idea did not die. There were those who simply thought that Isakov and the navy leadership were wrong. One of these was Rear Admiral Leonid Bekrenev. Bekrenev, yet another veteran of the Spanish Civil War; he had been the main mentor for Soviet naval special units during World War II. He saw no reason why that experience should not be relevant also in the Cold War.[94] In 1952, Bekrenev suggested to Captain Boris Margolin that the latter write an article in the journal *Biulleten Morskoi Razvedki* (The Bulletin of Naval Intelligence), where he should argue heavily in favor of naval special forces. The article was published as "The Use of Submarines to Execute Sub-sea Launches of Intelligence Operators into Enemy Territory." Probably to the surprise of many, it received favorable reviews from both the GRU and the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff.[95]

Spurred on by the reception of Margolin's article, Bekrenev and another naval spetsnaz protagonist, First Captain Dmitrii Shashenkov, renewed their pressure on the Navy Staff. As a GRU officer,

Shashenkov had taken part in the establishment of army special forces before he returned to the navy. He had become convinced of the importance of such forces. In fact, throughout his career he was an inexhaustible force advocating the continued development and professionalization of naval spetsnaz. Not only did he lobby for this service within the military organization; he also took the risk of enlisting the support of the KGB to put additional pressure on the navy.[96] Given the ambiguous feelings among military leaders for this institutional rival, it was a risky move.

In the end, the tireless efforts of Shashenkov and Bekrenev overcame the navy's institutional indifference and hostility toward frogmen.[97] One reason was that navy leadership learned that such units were growing in the fleets of other nations.[98] Thus, the first unit, the 6th MRP (Morskoi Razvedyvatelnyi Punkt—Naval Intelligence Point), was established in October 1953 in Sevastopol in the Crimea as part of the Black Sea Fleet. The other fleets followed in due course, with the Baltic Fleet in 1954, the Pacific Fleet in 1955, and the Northern Fleet in 1957. The MRPs had identical staffing levels in peacetime: 13 officers, 33 NCOs, and 76 conscripts. In times of mobilization, they would grow into brigades with as much as 400–500 operators in each. Conscripts in these elite units served for three years.[99] Sergei Kozlov emphasizes that the confidentiality surrounding the naval spetsnaz units was much greater than the already highly classified army spetsnaz units.[100]

The biggest problem at the beginning was a lack of specialized equipment. This made it difficult to convince navy leadership of the units' usefulness even after their formation. In comparison, army spetsnaz could get by with equipment developed for the regular army or for Airborne forces. As explained by a former army spetsnaz officer: "What is spetsnaz? Spetsnaz is a backpack, an outfit, some ammunition, a sub-machine gun and off you go!"[101] Naval spetsnaz, due to the nature of their trade, needed equipment designed especially

for them. There had been some evolution in the 1930s, but unfortunately those experiments proved short-lived. In the years 1934 to 1937, the Special Technical Bureau in St. Petersburg, under the leadership of V. I. Bekauri, constructed a number of midget submarine prototypes. Bakauri was known among the Soviet military for exotic weapons design. One of his more radical suggestions was a midget submarine that could be controlled remotely from an airplane.[102] Thus the nucleus of a Soviet design school for frogman equipment had been there in the 1930s, but Bekauri and most of his team fell victim to Stalin's paranoid purges of the military in the late 1930s, to the detriment of the post–World War II naval spetsnaz. They were all executed on charges of sabotage.[103] In this way, Stalin's obsessions left the postwar naval spetsnaz bereft of almost any domestically developed technology.

The first naval spetsnaz units in the 1950s thus had the unenviable task of demonstrating their worth without specialist diving gear or means for fast movement under water. These shortcomings were demonstrated during a 1956 exercise in waters around Sevastopol. Navy Chief of Staff Admiral Fokin was present to learn about the new capacity, but he left the exercise even more convinced than before of the futility of spending scarce resources on frogmen. Because of the dearth of specialized equipment, the frogmen were restricted in what they could show the admiral. According to the naval spetsnaz historian Iurii Kolesnikov, the Sevastopol failure confirmed to navy leadership that they had been right all along.[104] By the early 1960s, however, when specialized equipment started to arrive, proving their utility became easier. A demonstration of the potential of the Triton-1 midget submarine in Tallinn Harbor in 1961 went considerably better than events just five years earlier at Sevastopol.[105]

The Sevastopol incident caused the new force to pressure industry to develop technologies, and yet domestically produced equipment did not become widely available to frogmen until the early 1960s, about 10

years after the establishment of the first MRP. To remedy the problem while waiting for the domestic industry to catch up, there was an attempt to see if the capitalist enemy might help. In 1957, naval spetsnaz asked Soviet authorities for permission to purchase 100 modern diving suits from France, 50 diver propulsion vehicles from the French producer Kusto, and two English-built midget submarines. The request was flatly denied, however, because the purchases would have cost an exorbitant US$400,000. The navy leadership would go no further than buying one or two units of each item (minus the midget subs) to spur domestic manufacturing development.[106]

Since the frogmen had been foisted on the navy, the latter took no leading role in the doctrinal development of the new capacity. In fact, until 1959 navy intelligence did not dedicate any staff positions to development of naval special forces,[107] they were mostly left to themselves in terms of doctrine and operational planning. The former frogman Valentin Avinkin remembers how "in the early days there were no established doctrines for us. We did everything by trial and error. Almost all decisions on training were taken locally. There were only a minimum of instructions from the naval leadership."[108] Avinkin does point out, however, that World War II had created a generation of officers unafraid to take the initiative, and they were a great resource when the units had to create doctrine from scratch with little or no guidance from above.[109] Thus, naval SOF development in the Soviet Union came about because of bottom-up pressure, and it continued to develop largely as a bottom-up experiment interspersed with some emulation of foreign experience.

As for army spetsnaz, the idea of making them part of the Airborne forces came up several times during the Cold War, similar to what happened to naval spetsnaz in the early 1960s. After the first seven years of the frogmen's existence, navy intelligence still had little idea about how to use them. Thus, in 1962 the head of navy intelligence, Rear Admiral Boris Bobkov, suddenly presented a plan to the head of

the Navy Staff, Admiral Ivan Eliseev. His proposal was to integrate the frogmen into the Naval Infantry. Bobkov argued that naval spetsnaz had become a drag on the general development of navy intelligence by soaking up scarce resources. The frogman lobbyist and naval intelligence officer Shashenkov was alarmed. He had by now become head of the special forces directorate within GRU. In a bureaucratic counterattack, he was able to convince the head of the GRU, Ivan Serov, that navy intelligence as such was in serious organizational trouble. Serov initiated an investigation into the functioning of the service, and Bobkov suddenly had something much more important on his plate than taking over naval spetsnaz.[110]

Learning from others has been common in naval SOF in most countries. For any navy SOF in the 1960s, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that most were pupils of the Italians. In the 1930s, the superior naval strength of Britain and France in the Mediterranean intimidated Italy. Furthermore, the Italians knew that any symmetric response was beyond their means. Thus, they needed a capacity that could fight the British and French at sea asymmetrically. This was the background for the establishment of the Decima MAS naval special operations force in 1936. The predicament also led to research, development, and experimentation with midget submarines and other types of small submersible vessels. Decima MAS was to finally prove its value for Italy in World War II. The Italian frogmen started out with failure followed by failure, but since there was neither time nor money to develop an alternative capacity, the Italians had to give it up or get it right. Finally, in December 1941 they succeeded in an operation that arguably proved to the entire world that naval SOF was a good idea. In the morning of 19 December, operators from Decima MAS seriously damaged the battleship HMS *ueen Elisabeth* and the sister ship HMS *Valiant* at port in Alexandria, Egypt. In the words of H. I. Sutton, "In a single blow the entire battleship strength of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet was put out of action, and very

nearly sunk. The glory days of the Decima MAS had arrived."[111] The success of Decima MAS demonstrated the potential of naval special forces to other sections in the navy. When such forces expanded again in the 1960s, many countries started to purchase equipment from the Italians or built domestic copies in cooperation with Italian engineers. With the Cold War ongoing, however, this was not an option for the Soviets. Still, the Italian experience was not lost on them. Frogman veteran Gennadii Sizikov remembers how all navy spetsnaz officers would read the Russian translation of the book *The Black Prince*, written by a legendary leader of Decima MAS, Junio Valerio Borghese.[112]

There were also other external sources of inspiration. For example, the idea to parachute from helicopters came from watching American popular films in the early 1960s. Avinkin remembers how in the movie theater he saw American soldiers parachuting from helicopters instead of just lowering themselves to the ground by a rope or a winch, as the Soviets did. He thought to himself, "We also need to try this."[113]

Yet another example of foreign learning comes from the 1956 film documentary *The Silent World* by the French director Jacques Cousteau. This film is renowned for being one of the first to show the underwater world in color. France was at the time one of the foremost countries in the technological development of diving equipment.[114] The beauty of life under water, however, was not what impressed Soviet navy intelligence. They studied how the divers developed speed of maneuver. In 1957, a deputy head of the navy, Admiral Arseniy Golovko, gave the order to secretly re-edit the film into a three-part instruction film for Soviet frogmen on how to swim with flippers and use underwater propulsion vehicles.[115]

Domestically produced equipment for navy spetsnaz finally started to arrive from the early 1960s onward. This was again in many ways thanks to Shashenkov, the determined GRU officer. In the 1950s, he had gone from bureau to bureau to present ideas for frogman

equipment, always turned away. The order books were already full, and given the expected small size of navy spetsnaz units, Shashenkov's ideas seemed like they would demand years of research and development and show little promise for mass production.[116] Engaging with Shashenkov and the frogmen would not pay off for the bureaus and corporations. Thus, Shashenkov's only option was to go above the heads of enterprise directors. In 1955, he was able to convince the Navy Staff to hold two consecutive conferences on the development of vehicles for underwater warfare. This finally paid off. Enough influential people became convinced that Shashenkov's ideas were something to pursue. The conferences resulted in the adoption of the Working Program for the production of frogman equipment. With this in hand, Shashenkov in 1958 was able to approach torpedo engineers at the Leningrad Shipbuilding Institute with a plan they would have to take seriously. In December that year, the institute decided to initiate the construction of two types of diver propulsion vehicles. The first, Sirena, for two people, was based on the German Zh-7E torpedo. This was one of the Soviet war trophies that Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs Sergei Kruglov had dangled in front of the navy leadership in 1945.[117] The second, Protei, for one person, would be designed from scratch. Protei came in two versions: one fastened to the diver's back (Protei 1), the other to his chest (Protei 2). Almost immediately, however, the Protei 1 prototype was discarded. The divers felt the vessel controlled them more than they controlled it.[118] The main constructor of these vehicles, as well as much of the other frogman equipment developed in the Soviet Union, was the engineer Vladimir Troshin. This arms-tech specialist from the Russian naval special warfare community continued to develop and test new technologies until his death in 1996. After that, his son Petr Troshin carried the baton.

Broadly speaking, the Soviet Union developed three types of underwater vehicles for naval spetsnaz. The first were the diver

propulsion vehicles Sirena, Protei, and later Proton. Their purpose was to increase individual divers' range while under water, and the Proton was even made light enough so the diver could parachute with it from a helicopter. The latter quality was handy for inserting operators into enemy territory by first dropping them in the sea close to shore. Both Protei and Proton have been produced in updated versions, joined by a number of other diver propulsion vehicles.

The Triton midget submarine fulfilled several roles including the patrol of ports, detection of enemy naval special forces, underwater delivery of mines, delivery and recovery of frogmen, studying the sea bottom, repairing underwater pipelines, among others.[119] Work started on the Triton in the mid-1960s. The first version, which could carry no more than two frogmen, went into production in the mid-1970s. A total of 32 Triton-1s and 13 modernized Triton-2s were delivered to the fleet.[120] The Triton-2 was larger than Triton-1 and could take on an additional four frogmen. This was a minisub of the so-called wet type. It did not have an airtight hull. The frogmen would sit inside the submarine fully submerged in water. In 2008, a modernized version, Triton NN, completed trials, but as late as 2014 naval spetsnaz only had one of these units in service.[121]

Over time, Tritons came to be seen as insufficient for inserting reconnaissance teams. Thus, toward the end of the Soviet Union, development started on a third type of underwater vehicle, the Pirania midget submarine. It entered service in 1986 but was removed as early as 1999 due to technical weaknesses and the fact that many in the navy saw them as unnecessary.[122] There were, despite many prototypes, no obvious replacements for the Pirania. However, in 2014 one of the shipbuilders presented the Pirania-T at an arms exhibition in Astana, Kazakhstan.[123] Russian sources claim that the navy has more or less no interest in reviving the Pirania project.[124]

In addition to these vessels, there was domestic experimentation in other areas. Some of the most exotic tests took place on the Caspian

Sea, where spetsnaz leaders and naval engineers wanted to test whether so-called ground-effect vehicles (known as "ekranoplanes") could insert naval SOF into enemy territory. The "ground effect" is the added lift force and decreased drag that a fixed-wing aircraft receives when flying close to a static surface, in this case the sea. The Soviet Union is, as far as is known, the only country in the world that made serious attempts to use ground-effect vehicles for military purposes during the Cold War. US photoreconnaissance spotted the strange plane in the mid-1960s and dubbed it the "Caspian Sea Monster." Using ground effect, these planes could skim the surface of the sea at high speeds, undetected by radar.[125] The attempts to use them for naval spetsnaz, however, seem not to have been very successful. They were soon forgotten.[126]

Other tests, remembered by Troshin himself, were conducted to determine how fast a human being could travel safely with the help of underwater propulsion. The tests demonstrated that 2.8 knots was the maximum—any faster and the frogman's face would be dangerously squeezed and his breathing equipment torn away. However, with the addition of a cowl protecting the diver's face, speed could increase to 4.3 knots.[127]

Despite significant domestic technological advances in the early 1960s and later, the naval spetsnaz historian Iurii Kolesnikov concludes in his 2004 book *Komandos—Morskoi Spetsnaz* (Commandos—naval spetsnaz) that technological development in the service of these forces never became a priority in the Soviet Union.[128] The process at no time came to be routine. Research and development were always dependent on the constant petitioning of enthusiasts such as Bekrenev and Shashenkov. Progress would slow down if such enthusiasts did not occupy leading positions. Kolesnikov argues that, after the initial boost in the 1960s, "the attitude toward science started to change. Gradually it came to be seen as a less important addition to the frogman development. The findings and propositions of the scientists became

something that one could easily ignore." The current limited interest for the Triton NN and Pirania-T may support of Kolesnikov's argument, and in November 2017 an article on the Russian naval industry website flotprom.ru argued that the Russian Ministry of Defense had started purchasing Germany's Seabob BlackShadow 730 swimmer delivery vehicle (a high-tech underwater scooter of sorts) because the technological level of domestic equivalents was at such a "dangerously low level."[129]

Naval spetsnaz struggled hard to prove their worth with navy leadership. In time, they were aided by changes in the strategic environment that demanded capabilities for which naval spetsnaz were well suited: (1) demolition of enemy naval ships and ports with the use of small nuclear devices; (2) sabotage of enemy offshore oil and gas production; and (3) sabotage missions against the US SOSUS underwater surveillance system.

The use of miniature nukes was one of the most secret of all special forces missions in both the East and the West during the Cold War. In 2014, Adam Rawnsley and David Brown wrote an article in *Foreign Policy* where they revealed that US SOF during the Cold War had carried miniature nuclear weapons on their backs.[130] The article was based on newly declassified US official documents. Rawnsley and Brown argued that part of the explanation for the nuclear SOF missions was that the United States Army had been uncomfortable with the navy and air force monopoly on the nuclear dimension of war. Portable mini-nukes were the means to rectify this slight, allowing SOF to "deploy behind enemy lines to destroy infrastructure and materiel."[131]

The British made similar plans for the naval domain in the early 1950s. The idea was to use naval special forces and midget submarines to deliver nuclear mines to destroy Soviet naval bases. However, London had to abandon the plans because of a lack of fissile material.[132]

We do not know how much the Soviets knew about the US and British plans, but similar developments took place on their side. The Soviet nuclear industry called the devices "special charges," but the frogmen decided to call them "mackerels" because of the way they were shaped. Operational planning and technological development for the use of mackerels started in 1957. The first trial version was ready in 1961 and soon after was included in the naval spetsnaz arsenal of weaponry. The first charges weighted only about 45 kilograms; later versions became more sophisticated but much heavier. In the early 1980s, some may have been as heavy as 200 kilograms. At each MRP, the designated 3rd unit was (and probably remains) the demolition unit. It was therefore the "thirds" that trained on the use of the nuclear mackerels.[133] The purpose was essentially the same as for the unrealized British plans: to destroy enemy port infrastructure.

Later, in the early 1970s, naval spetsnaz gained additional importance when the Soviet General Staff and GRU started to pay attention to the extraction of oil and gas by the NATO members Great Britian, Norway, Denmark, Holland, and Belgium on their respective continental shelfs. The Soviet leaders saw this activity as strategically significant for two reasons. First, in time of war, depriving the enemy of vital energy resources through acts of sabotage could help the Soviet war effort. Second, they expected that, in time of peace, Western nations would most likely exploit this legitimate and innocent-looking offshore activity to expand intelligence-gathering on Soviet naval activity. In 1974, an interagency expert group was established to decide how and by what means oil and gas facilities could be disabled in the period leading up to war.[134] The group, including several naval spetsnaz operators, headed to the North Sea for a monthlong expedition to create a complete map of the new installations. The resulting report ended with a summary on how best to destroy as many elements of the infrastructure as possible and giving naval spetsnaz a central role. It also pointed out that the higher

density of commercial vessels in the North Sea, brought on by the new activity, presented the Soviet Union with an unexpected advantage. With the increased traffic, it would now be possible for civilian ships (in addition to submarines) to insert naval spetsnaz without evoking suspicion. The Soviet arms industry was engaged to develop and produce sea mines with exceptional explosive force to take down oil and gas infrastructure.[135]

Finally, the frogmen of the Northern Fleet had a somewhat different development from those in the other theaters of war. The MRP station of the Northern Fleet was actually disbanded in the early 1960s after only a few years of operation. There seems to be at least three reasons for this. First, the inhospitable northern climate was a serious problem. The frogmen developed colds so often that this took an unacceptable toll on the training. An official commission from Moscow sent to investigate the prevalence of illnesses concluded that the cold water and air temperatures of the far north made it impossible for the Northern Fleet to maintain naval special forces. Second, the seabed conditions off the Norwegian coast were exceptionally difficult. The Northern Fleet's MRP trained for deep reconnaissance missions into Norwegian territory.[136] For landing SOF through a submarine's torpedo tube, the submarine had to rest on the seabed. This was not a problem in the relatively shallow coastal waters of the Baltic and Black Seas. However, conditions were different in the much deeper North and Barents Seas. The minimal depths off much of the Norwegian seaboard were around 200 meters. The diving equipment of a Soviet frogman was made for a maximum depth of only 40 meters.[137] Thus, landing frogmen from submarines onto Norwegian territory was almost impossible. Finally, a general downsizing of the Soviet armed forces in the early 1960s may also have led to the closing of the Northern Fleet's MRP. The navy was originally asked to cut back two MRPs, but by sacrificing the one with the most problems the navy seems to have been able to save the rest.[138]

Twenty years later, in the early 1980s, the absence of naval spetsnaz in the far north became a strategic problem. In addition to their role in nuclear deterrence, the submarines of the Northern Fleet were responsible for preventing seaborne military assistance from the United States to Europe in case of war. Initial Soviet estimates suggested that the submarine fleet should be able to prevent such assistance, but the same estimates also indicated that the effort might lead to the loss of as much as 90 percent of the northern submarine fleet.[139] Later, Soviet planners started to doubt even this calculation, fearing that any mission to block transatlantic routes in case of conflict would fail. The reason was that Soviet submarines on patrol had started to hear unfamiliar clicking noises. They concluded they were coming from US underwater listening cables. If such was the case, it constituted a formidable threat to Soviet submarines. The Soviets were afraid that, with the enhanced intelligence from what later became known as the US SOSUS passive sonar system, the United States would know the location of most Soviet submarines most of the time. Using this information, the Americans could employ nuclear weapons to destroy a great part of the Soviet submarine fleet even before US surface convoys had left port. A special division of submarines was created to counter SOSUS, but this countermeasure was soon deemed largely noneffective. The cables were almost impossible to find in the ocean. The Soviet military planners saw that SOSUS had one Achilles' heel, however. This was the onshore data-processing stations on which the system depended. Without them the system was useless. Disabling processing stations was a perfect job for naval spetsnaz. Thus, the military leadership decided to reestablish a naval spetsnaz station in the Northern Fleet despite the fact that the problems leading to its closure in early 1960s persisted.

When the station began to operate for a second time in 1985, Gennadii Zakharov, the first commander of the new 420th MRP in Poliarnyi outside Murmansk, remembers that the cold-water problem

was still the most urgent predicament.[140] So at first they recruited individuals who had grown up in the Murmansk region. Experts assumed that they would have a higher-than-average tolerance for lengthy exposure to cold water. This was the same logic that the KGB had used when it decided to establish a Chukchi (indigenous people inhabiting the Chukchi Peninsula on the Bering Strait) Spetsnaz KGB company within their Khabarovsk Regiment. The Chukchi spetsnaz specialized in warfare in temperatures down to minus-40 Celsius.[141] Physiologically such higher tolerance is questionable, but it is probably true that people who have grown up in cold climates have a better understanding of how to deal with the cold. In addition, military leaders assumed that specific endurance training methods in cold conditions could augment the operators' initial ability to swim in cold waters. For example, the frogmen were ordered to build igloos and to live in them for as long as they could without any form of heating. Major Igor Astakhov, one of those condemned to igloo life, recalls that nobody managed for more than 48 consecutive hours.[142] The new Murmansk frogmen also climbed mountains in Armenia to learn how to scale the steep cliffs of Norwegian fiords. Finally, the submarine depth issue was solved by launching the frogmen from the torpedo tube while the submarine was attached to the seabed with an anchor and submerged no deeper than the 40 meters for which the diving equipment was made.

In contrast to army spetsnaz, the naval units never had the chance to take part in protracted combat during the Cold War. This is in sharp contrast to most of their Western equivalents. Many Western naval SOF have taken part in key land operations at least since the Vietnam War. H. I. Sutton ascribes this "over-the-beach capacity" to a combination of the units' own desire to expand their role and the fact that there was an increasing need for "versatile special units for small scale wars" in many Western countries.[143] In the United States, an expanded land role for naval SOF was the result of lobbying by the

Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Arleigh Burke. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy wanted the US military to increase its abilities to conduct unconventional warfare. This was necessary in the effort to combat the worldwide rise in communist-supported guerrilla warfare. Admiral Burke did not want the navy to miss out just because this meant a priority for land operations. In a letter to his fellow flag officer, Admiral John Sides, he wrote that the navy should "do as much as we can in guerrilla warfare . . . even if it is not our primary business."[144] The conversion of many underwater demolition teams (UDTs) into the navy SEALs in 1962 was a direct result of such thinking.

In the Soviet Union, there was not a similar emphasis on unconventional warfare; nor was there any Admiral Burke equivalent pushing for naval spetsnaz in land operations. Nobody saw any reason for why the naval special forces should be diverted from their main job of preparing for a big war with NATO. It should be mentioned here that the United States continued for a long time to maintain UDTs separate from the SEALs to take care of some of the more traditional naval SOF tasks. In many ways, Soviet and Russian naval spetsnaz were and are similar to these UDTs. Soviet naval spetsnaz remained a capacity almost exclusively designed for the maritime and littoral domains of major war.

Perhaps most crucially, naval spetsnaz did not share with their army comrades the critical experience of a decade of daily combat in Afghanistan. The Soviet military's unwillingness to see those years in Afghanistan as anything more than a distraction meant there was no urgent call for naval spetsnaz to get involved. It never hurt their prestige in the eyes of the country's political and military leadership that they did not go to Afghanistan.

This does not mean that naval spetsnaz never undertook risky missions. The first time mentioned in open sources was probably when operators from the 561st MRP at Parusnoe on the Baltic Sea went as part of a navy contingent to the Mediterranean in support of Egypt in

the 1967–1970 Israeli-Egyptian war of attrition. According to a Russian source, at least one of the Israeli boats claimed sunk by the Egyptians may in reality have been the victim of a spetsnaz operation conducted by the 561st.[145] There is no hard proof of this, but the commander of that unit from 1965 to 1969, Arnold Fedorov, was later awarded the Order of the Red Star. This was not an award he would have gotten simply for being present in the Mediterranean. In another Middle East example, it was probably naval spetsnaz that delivered Soviet arms to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine leader Wadie Haddad in the Bay of Aden in 1975.[146]

An entirely different mission took place leading up to the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981. At this time, Soviet leadership very seriously considered a Warsaw Pact invasion of Poland in the same way they had invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. If that was to happen, the lives of the Soviet officers and their families stationed in Poland could be in danger. They could be attacked or taken hostage. To prepare for such a contingency, lightly armed naval spetsnaz were sent into the country in the summer of 1981. They entered in civilian clothes and with enough weapons to defend Soviet citizens if need be. One spetsnaz group would take care of protection while another brought in special equipment for bugging the communication lines of the Polish opposition, the Polish intelligence services, and even their own KGB *agentura* (spies).[147]

In the post-Soviet period, during the First Chechen War, frogmen from several MRPs participated on a voluntary basis in that conflict.[148] The navy leadership, however, seems to have regretted the decision to let their spetsnaz go to Chechnya voluntarily. When the Second Chechen War started in 1999, none were allowed to go, even if they wanted. Aleksandr Derzhavin claims the main reason was that the frogmen in the First Chechen War had been used in roles they were not trained for, resulting in sustained losses on an unjustifiable scale.

The navy leadership saw no reason to repeat the misfortunes from four years earlier.[149]

It is worth mentioning that the Soviet naval special forces grew up with two cousins with whom they were (and sometimes continue to be) confused. These are the fighter divers (*boevye plovtsy*) and the "hydronauts" (*gidronavty*). The first, officially known as anti-sabotage units (*otryady protivodiversionnykh sil i sredstv*) are clearance divers who also train to fight foreign naval special forces in domestic waters. There was throughout the Cold War a stronger emphasis in the Soviet Union than in the West on the possibility for man-to-man underwater frogman combat. The Soviet Union actually created a number of special underwater weapons that these forces could use in such encounters. NATO countries did not imitate the Soviets on this count. They refrained from creating similar forces separate from their naval SOF. Today, the fighter divers share several of the same competencies as naval spetsnaz. Still, their role is almost entirely defensive. There were 13 such units in 2019: 6 in the Northern Fleet, 2 each in the Baltic, Black Sea, and Pacific Fleets, and 1 in the Caspian Flotilla. They are often wrongly termed "spetsnaz," but they do not train in many of the disciplines one normally associates with naval SOF.

The hydronauts are the specially trained divers of the Ministry of Defense's Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI), established in 1976. GUGI is an independent service directly subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. It does not take orders from the General Staff. In the 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union developed military capacities for deep-sea diving. This included dedicated diving capsules, special submarines and surface vessels, and divers with special equipment and competence. The new units had several missions. They were to recover enemy missiles that had settled on the ocean floor, attach listening devices to the adversary's underwater communication cables, and destroy such cables in case of

war. The hydronauts are also sometimes referred to as "spetsnaz" or "deep-sea spetsnaz," but again their tasks are different from traditional special forces. Today the deep-sea divers and their special submarines are part of the 29th Special Submarine Squadron, which is directly subordinated to GUGI.

THE BIRTH OF SIBLINGS

When Iuri Andropov was promoted to chair of the KGB in 1967, his number-one priority was to regenerate a specific KGB capacity for "special actions of a political nature." This should, according to Christopher Andrew and Vasilii Mitrokhin, be understood as "the peacetime use of sabotage and other forms of violence in the furtherance of Soviet policy."[150] In today's parlance, he was seeking to boost the Soviets' capacity for hybrid warfare. However, the longer he remained in the chair, the more reluctant he became to engage in such activity. Nevertheless, he went on to expand the KGB's ability to conduct special operations. In fact, he established KGB spetsnaz forces in parallel with the already existing military ones.

The first KGB training school for spetsnaz started in the Moscow suburb of Golitsyno in 1970 under the intendedly opaque designation KUOS (Kursy Usovershenstvovania Ofitserskogo Sostava—Advanced Training Courses for Officers).[151] KGB officers were given a seven-month course in how to create diversions in NATO countries, either independently or in coordination with friendly partisans in those countries.[152] For example, there were plans to use the KGB to assist the Greek communists militarily in the event they attempted a coup against the governing military junta from 1967 to 1974.[153] Training new Spetsnaz KGB (aka "Komitetchiki") was often remarkably similar to that received by the military special forces.[154] In fact, the last commander of KUOS, Colonel Sergei Golov, points out that KUOS

had annual training sessions together with both army and navy spetsnaz.[155] This included cooperation with the 17th MRP in Baku to develop their own frogman capacity.[156]

Like the army's spetsnaz, Spetsnaz KGB developed in cooperation with Airborne forces. The parachute training took place under their auspices, and the training program was inspired by World War II Airborne tactics.[157] Secrecy, even as to other departments within the same agency, was likewise important. Vladimir Surodin, who entered KUOS in 1975, remembers the similarities: just as most soldiers and officers did not know about the existence of military spetsnaz, most personnel in the KGB did not know about KUOS.[158]

The KUOS courses are especially important for institutional memory in the KGB (and later the FSK and then FSB, the KGB's post-Soviet successor organization), because they established a suite of direct foreign interference options for the KGB beyond assassinations. The FSB in the late 2000s, partly in conflict with the GRU, tried to expand its own foreign operations after relations with the West soured.[159] Because of the KUOS legacy, this was not really viewed as the FSB stepping out of its accepted role. In fact, foreign operations, in addition to domestic ones, had been part of the KGB's special forces portfolio all along. To underscore this point, only officers with foreign language skills were accepted into KUOS.

Spetsnaz GRU was considered an instrument of major war, both doctrinally and organizationally. Furthermore, because there needed to be a lot of SzGRU forces if war should come, it relied heavily on conscripts. Although Spetsnaz GRU was elite by army standards, it did not really fit the image of the highly professional and experienced units that would conduct covert and limited actions of violence during peacetime. Thus, the fact that Spetsnaz GRU and Spetsnaz KGB trained in similar ways did not necessarily mean that the two forces overlapped a lot in terms of responsibility. There was, at least on paper, a recognized division of labor. For example, an internal KGB

report from 1969 argued that there was little point in training Spetsnaz KGB for attacks against NATO and American military installations because Spetsnaz GRU already had that covered.[160]

The existence of a division of labor, however, did not mean there was coordination. In fact, when Ivashutin moved from the KGB to the GRU, he acknowledged this as a major problem. Ivashutin was the first to institutionalize monthly meetings for coordinating between himself and the head of the KGB First Directorate (foreign intelligence).[161]

In the pre-Afghanistan memoir literature, there is almost no mention of an institutional GRU–KGB rivalry regarding spetsnaz. Perhaps this literature systematically omits the topic if the authors judged there was no reason to air the dirty laundry. But perhaps there was, in fact, no big rivalry to speak of. As long as both types of spetsnaz were training and not engaging in actual combat, limited coordination did not really rankle anyone. As we will see in chapter 5, real combat in Afghanistan sometimes led to institutional rivalry and animosity. But the lack of real evidence for a KGB–GRU rivalry in peacetime could be the result of unequal bureaucratic standing within the system. In Soviet times, when push came to shove, the KGB called the shots. The hierarchy in the Soviet Union was clear in terms of institutional power: party first, followed by the KGB and finally the military. The KGB monitored the military, never the other way around.

KUOS was more like a training arrangement than a military unit, and the next major development in Spetsnaz KGB capabilities was the establishment of the Alpha special force in 1974. This was a coherent fighting unit staffed by personnel drawn from KUOS, and Alpha was part of an international trend. In 1972, German police had failed spectacularly in saving the Israeli sportsmen taken hostage by the Palestinian Black September group during the Summer Olympics in Munich. All nine hostages were killed. This led governments across the West to start developing special units on constant alert to deal

with such situations.[162] And in 1973 Moscow faced a similar challenge at home. A Soviet airliner was hijacked on its flight from Moscow to Briansk in the Belorussian Soviet Republic. The hijackers demanded to be flown to a Western airport. The pilot, ignoring their demands, instead landed the plane at Vnukovo Airport outside Moscow. There, police volunteers stormed the plane. The two hijackers were killed, and all hostages survived, an operational a success. However, the lessons drawn by Soviet authorities were that this was due more to luck than to competence. None of the police volunteers had prior training in hostage situations. The Munich and the Vnukovo incidents are important in explaining the establishment of Alpha. The new organization rose from about 50 personnel in the mid-1970s to about 500 by the end of the Soviet Union in 1989.[163]

Initially, Soviet authorities were not especially concerned about terrorism, as they assumed that a totalitarian state had certain advantages in this regard. The gun control regime was severe; comprehensive political surveillance meant that the KGB would likely intercept plans for political violence; and a very strict border regime made foreign support for terrorist plots unlikely. However, after Munich and Vnukovo, Soviet authorities realized that the country could be vulnerable hijackings or hostage-taking. This was true for Soviet citizens abroad and at home. In particular, authorities were afraid of hostage-takings at foreign embassies in Moscow.

In addition to counterterrorism, the unit was given a role in effecting arrests on Soviet territory that might be especially tricky, such as foreign agents and dangerous Soviet criminals.[164] For example, Alpha arrested the CIA spy Adolf Tolkachev in Moscow in 1985.[165]

Later, some of the responsibility for domestic hostage situations was outsourced from Alpha to the Ministry of Interior. This ministry established the Vityaz (Knight) unit for this purpose in 1977. Alpha and Vityaz trained together, at least in the first years after Vityaz's establishment.[166]

Finally, Alpha was never meant to serve exclusively as a domestic counterterrorism force. Because of its unique training in break-ins and close-quarters combat, it trained to destroy underground bunkers in foreign countries in case of war.[167] Soviet authorities expected that Western political leaders would try to lead their countries' war efforts from such shelters. Thus, there was a need for troops specially trained to take control of and destroy shelters. Alpha was the obvious choice. It would be foolish not to exploit this competence, first developed for domestic needs, when something similar was required abroad.

The final expansion of the KGB into the domain of special operations was the creation of Vympel (Pennant) in 1981. The initiative came from the head of KGB's S Directorate (illegals), Iurii Drozdov, a legendary Spetsnaz KGB figure. He was inspired by personal experience storming the palace of then–President Hafizullah Amin toward the start of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. When Drozdov died in 2017 at the age of 91, he was one of very few high-ranking KGB officers to receive eulogies in major Western newspapers.[168]

Drozdov argued that the KGB needed a unit that could combine intelligence-gathering with active measures, such as sabotage actions in peacetime (in Russian, *razvedchik-diversant*).[169] It had to be a standing professional unit, not conscript- and mobilization-based like Spetsnaz GRU, and it needed to have a broader profile than the antiterror Alpha.[170] Andropov agreed to discuss the case with Leonid Brezhnev. The latter gave his consent, and Drozdov got to work.

Vympel was subordinated to the First Chief Directorate (FCD) of the KGB in charge of foreign intelligence. This directorate was considered the most prestigious within that organization. Since 1972, it had been separate from the Lubianka KGB headquarters in the center of Moscow, at Iasenovo on the southeastern periphery of the capital. Vympel's specialty was operations in the developing world. To improve skills, it turned to the best insurgency experts in the socialist

camp: the Cuban special forces. In the early 1980s, most Vympel operators would go to Cuba for courses lasting three to six months to learn sabotage techniques, urban warfare, and advanced close-combat techniques.[171] According to Aleksandr Kolpakidi and Aleksandr Sever, Vympel saw action in Mozambique, Angola, Vietnam, Laos, and Lebanon in the 1980s.[172] No details of these operations can be found in open sources.

In addition to the strategic missions, Vympel was also the FCD's in-house protection service. For example, when FCD personnel went on joint excursions or campouts in the woods, they would often take a Vympel unit for protection.[173] In the same way as there were frictions within the GRU between foreign military intelligence personnel and Spetsnaz GRU, there could also be discord between Vympel and the rest of the FCD. In both cases, strategic intelligence personnel tended to see themselves as the brain and the special operations forces as muscle, which the latter found condescending. Sergei Tretiakov, later a Russian defector, was deputy *rezident* (head) of the Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki (SVR—the Russian civilian foreign intelligence and post-Soviet successor to the FCD) mission in Manhattan in the late 1990s. He was assigned a subordinate who previously had been a Vympel officer. Tretiakov seriously questioned this decision. His opinion was that for spying he needed intellectuals, not trained killers.[174]

Despite some division of labor and institutional rivalry, it was not always clear what distinguished the various special operations forces from one another. Sometimes, even spetsnaz officers were confused. Vympel founder Drozdov (admittedly, not unbiased) recalls that "we saw it like this: GRU had the best fighters, Alpha were the best antiterror experts, and Vympel was the most intellectual of the Russian special forces."[175] By "intellectual," he probably meant something closer to "political." That is, Vympel would be the first choice for politically sensitive foreign operations. As we will see in chapter 5, thinking along these lines was likely behind the division of

labor during the storming of the palace of President Amin. Nevertheless, it seems fair to argue that the limited coordination between the KGB and the military caused an institutional confusion that has hampered the effectiveness of Russia's use of force up until today. For example, there were many reports in the Russian press about the uncoordinated agendas of the FSB and the GRU in Russia's facilitation of the rebellion in Donbas in Ukraine from 2014 onward.[176]

SPETSNAZ AND THE INTERNATIONAL PROLETARIAT

The Soviet Union was a state with a calling. Ever since the Bolshevik victory in 1917, facilitating the final worldwide triumph of communism was canon. As pointed out by Odd Arne Westad, the United States and the Soviet Union were "envisaged by their founders to be grand experiments, on the success of which the future of human kind depended."[177] While there is little reason to doubt the ideological component of Soviet support for anti-imperialist forces in the developing world, it was probably also combined with the more general geopolitical ambitions that often accompany great powers.[178]

In Moscow, however, the issue of direct Soviet *military* involvement in that part of the world was internally controversial. The imperative of the final global triumph of communism could not be questioned, but according to the leading Russian defense intellectual Andrei Kokoshin "it would be incorrect to say that the concepts of world revolution and its export dominated the thinking of the Red Army command." In fact, most of the major Soviet experts of that period (the 1960s through the 1980s) thought that, no matter how just these wars were, the Soviet Union should strive to stay out, as they often carried a forbidding danger of escalation and could threaten the country's security.[179] Nevertheless, the moral imperative sometimes

seems to have trumped expert opinion and calculations of Soviet state security.

Yet given the recognized danger of uncontrolled escalation, it was important to provide any military assistance in such a way that minimized the danger of violent conflict with the West. SOF, with their clandestine nature, light footprint, and elite recruits/professional soldiers, were especially suited for this. This carries a striking parallel to current Western thinking on the role of special forces in a world returned to great power competition. For example, Philip Lohaus has argued that SOF are especially useful to avoid escalation today because of their "agility, precision, subtlety and speed . . . at the lower end of the escalatory spectrum."[180]

Thus, despite Red Army command skepticism, the Soviet Union did become engaged in a number of military operations in the developing world. Roger Kanet has argued that until the mid-1970s this role was largely limited to arms exports, military advice, and training.[181] Later, the Soviets became bolder, for at least two reasons. First, Soviet leadership was less afraid of escalation after the US defeat in Vietnam.[182] Leonid Brezhnev did not believe US public opinion would permit any more US military adventures in the developing world. Consequently, there would be less risk for the Soviets of meeting the United States on the battlefield if Moscow were to engage.[183] Second, Soviet power-projection capabilities had been strengthened by the early 1970s.[184] Before that time, the Soviets would have had problems bringing their military gear to far-off theaters of war even if they wanted to. The result was that Moscow started to intervene more directly in the developing world, especially Africa.[185] The most clear-cut examples were support of the Marxist Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola (MPLA) government in the civil war in Angola (1975–2002) and support on the Ethiopian side against Somalia in the War of Ogaden (1977–1978).

There are fewer Russian open sources on spetsnaz engagements in the developing world. But enough can be deduced from the few sources that exist to outline the role of spetsnaz in supporting Soviet allies there. Furthermore, the memoir literature is more open about training developing world soldiers on Soviet soil than it is about Soviet forces conducting operations abroad.

Aleksandr Okorokov, in his 2008 study *Sekretnye Voiny Sovetskogo Soiuza* (The secret wars of the Soviet Union), writes that, "for understandable reasons, little is known about the activities of the Soviet special forces on the territories of foreign states."[186] He does, however, leave little doubt that they were there. It is also clear that, despite orders to the contrary, they on occasion took part in combat. According to Okorokov, spetsnaz "would generally take part in such operations as the destruction of enemy command centers and the liquidation of high value individuals. In addition, both GRU and KGB special forces would conduct special intelligence operations for which neither local forces nor other Soviet units in the theater of operation were cut out for."[187]

Start with official sources: in December 2014 the Russian Ministry of Defense's television channel TV Zvezda (Star TV) announced that a small number of Spetsnaz GRU operations abroad during the Cold War had been declassified.[188] The channel did not explain why these operations in particular had been chosen. Furthermore, some are difficult to corroborate through other sources. Nevertheless, they can be seen as examples of what may have happened in other places.

According to Zvezda, the first major Spetsnaz GRU operation on foreign soil was the successful attack by 10 operators on a secret US military base in Cambodia in 1968. The purpose of this operation was to capture an American Cobra helicopter. Soviet engineers were particularly interested in the helicopter's unique weapons guidance system. The surprise attack, according to Zvezda, resulted in the death of 20 US soldiers. One captured Cobra was taken to Vietnam, and a

number of other Cobras were destroyed. Zvezda also claimed that the CIA later learned about this operation from a KGB leak. In general, there is almost no other open information about Spetsnaz GRU operations in Cambodia and Vietnam. However, speaking about his participation in the Second Chechen War (1999–2009), at least one anonymous Spetsnaz GRU operator claimed that he had fought together with officers who had experience from combat in those two countries.[189] No open US source, as far as can be discerned, has so far confirmed this story.

The second operation is better known and can be corroborated through other sources. This is the use of Spetsnaz GRU to take control of the airport, newspapers, railway station, and other important buildings in Prague during the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. For example, in a deceptive maneuver, a plane carrying covert spetsnaz troops asked Prague airport for permission to land because of engine trouble. Once on the ground, according to Zvezda, the spetsnaz took control of the airport in less than 10 minutes. The purpose was to prepare for the almost immediate following-on landing of a Soviet VDV Airborne division at the same airport. Simultaneously, other spetsnaz took control of the country's government buildings. These latter forces had infiltrated the country some days before. Finally, spetsnaz escorted parts of the Czechoslovak leadership to Moscow for forced negotiations after the Soviets were in control of the Czech capital.[190]

The third example is the civil war in Angola, where Spetsnaz GRU captured foreign military equipment used by the forces opposing the MPLA. According to Zvezda, these spetsnaz were able to capture a Chinese T-59 main battle tank and bring it back to Moscow. They failed, however, to get their hands on the much more valuable US-made Stinger portable air defense systems. That would have to wait until the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

The fourth and final example, as reported by Zvezda, is a hostage rescue operation by the Spetsnaz KGB unit Vympel in Lebanon in 1985. Four diplomats from the Russian embassy were taken hostage by the Palestinian group Forces of Khaled ben el-Wahlid. The hostage-takers demanded that Moscow put pressure on the Syrian government to call off a planned military action in northern Lebanon. There was also a demand that the Soviet Union close its embassy in Beirut. According to the former Soviet intelligence officer Iurii Perfilev, who was the KGB resident[191] in Lebanon at the time, the operation was planned and executed by Imad Mugnia. Mugnia was close to the Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat, although he had initiated this particular operation without Arafat's consent.[192]

To be taken seriously, the hostage-takers quickly shot and killed one of the Soviet hostages, an individual who was already injured at the time of his murder. Zvezda claims that Vympel operators in response killed 10 fighters from Mugnia's group, one after another, in various locations around the small country. They topped off the killing spree by sending a letter to Mugnia telling him that, unless he released the hostages, he was himself welcome to choose the next fighter that Vympel would shoot. Exactly what happened is still murky. The KGB resident Perfilev disputes the Zvezda story. According to him, there were no SOF in action at all. He claims that the remaining hostages were released, partly because the Soviet Union forced Syria to abandon the operation, and partly because of successful Soviet negotiations with prominent Palestinian leaders. The former Vympel commander Iurii Drozdov corroborates Zvezda's version. He states that the Vympel unit was inserted into Lebanon from a Soviet submarine and that it was the serial killing of Mugnia's fighters that liberated the hostages.[193]

In addition to the stories presented by Zvezda, the former KGB special forces operators Valerii Murin and Vladimir Sudorin claim that Spetsnaz GRU fought directly against US special forces in 1970 in Son

Tay in Vietnam and in 1978 in Angola.[194] However, they provide no details, and none of these claims can be substantiated through open sources.

As already stated, Soviet military involvement in the developing world before Afghanistan was mostly in the civil war in Angola and on the Ethiopian side in the Ogaden War. It is worth examining these two cases in more detail. Sergei Kolomnin, who worked first as a military interpreter in Angola and later in the Soviet Ministry of Defense on Angola issues, estimates that a total of about 12,000 Soviet troops may have served in Angola from 1974 to 1992. Viktor Murakhovskii, who was a Soviet military adviser to Ethiopia during the Ogaden War, suggests that as many as 4,000 Soviet troops may have participated in that conflict.[195] If these estimates are correct, there is little doubt that the Soviet Union had high stakes in the management of these conflicts.

Angola was Soviet battleground number-one in Africa. About 40 Spetsnaz GRU troops were part of the first contingent of Soviets to arrive, and according to Kolomnin the SOF trained local special forces. Later, they went on to train fighters from South Africa (the African National Congress, a liberation movement against apartheid and later a political party in South Africa) and Namibia (the South West Africa People's Organization, an independence movement and later a political party in Namibia) in guerrilla warfare. The latter instruction started in earnest only in the second half of the 1980s. This may have been prompted by Angolan authorities in their 1983 decision to invite SOF instructors from Portugal, the former colonial power. They were to train what the Angolans preferred to call their "commandos." The Angolans informed the Soviets that the Portuguese had long proposed to assist in this matter and saw no reason to decline such a generous offer. The Soviets, however, had little appetite for involving a NATO member in a conflict in which they themselves were directly engaged. The main Soviet military adviser to Angola at the time, General Konstantin Kurochkin, suggested that the Angolans at least familiarize

themselves with what additional assistance Soviet SOF could offer before bringing in the Portuguese.[196]

Headstrong and with a background in Airborne forces, General Kurochkin was the most assertive of all the Soviet military advisers in Angola. The Angolans liked the way he lobbied on behalf of their cause in Moscow. However, they also had misgivings. In particular, they found Kurochkin unable to leave behind his Soviet-style big-battle stereotypes from World War II. This brought him into conflict with the Angolans and the Cubans (who were also active in this theater). The Angolans concluded that Kurochkin had a very limited understanding civil war. Angola's chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Ant nio dos Santos Franca, recalls that Kurochkin's "frame of reference" was World War II and that "he created many problems for us . . . and wanted to be the boss."[197] Thus, in the end the Angolans decided to decline his proposed SOF training, and instead several Angolan commando units were educated by the Portuguese. Probably to limit Portuguese involvement, the Soviet Union in response in 1984 sent a large group of special warfare experts from Vympel to Luanda.[198]

Whether there was any functioning division of labor between Vympel and the Spetsnaz GRU in the country is not clear. We do know that Vympel would concentrate on training special units not subordinated to the Angolan Ministry of Defense. When the KGB Colonel Petr Suslov arrived in Angola in 1986, his main job was to help improve the work of the recently established SOF command of Angola's Ministry of the Interior. This command's main responsibility was to capture rebel commanders and fight South African SOF and mercenaries.[199] Kolomnin emphasizes that Vympel, under the leadership of Petr Suslov, "established from scratch the special forces of the Angolan Ministry of the Interior."[200] Vympel veteran Pavel Evdokimov stresses that, in addition to supporting Angolans, the unit

also saw the mission as perfect for its own training and professional development.[201]

Valerii Beliaiev, a former general and lead Soviet military adviser to Angola from 1988 to 1991, recalls that the Soviet military would not only train but also escort Angolans into action. This included special reconnaissance missions deep into enemy territory[202] in contradiction to instructions from Moscow. Here, the main tenet was that the Soviet forces should not participate in combat themselves. Moscow was afraid of international scandal if Soviet troops were killed in action or taken prisoner. Keeping out of harm's way, however, was difficult once on the battlefield. Valentin Gaeva, who was in Angola as a military intelligence instructor, remembers that Soviet commanders often took a dual approach to this question. As he recalls, when General Kurochkin was the main Soviet military adviser, he would tell his instructors that "an adviser should always be by his student's side, otherwise there is no purpose to our presence here."[203] Thus, the order from Moscow to stay out of trouble was probably often ignored. At the same time, direct Soviet participation in combat was not only up to them to decide. Angolan commanders had their own orders from above. One was that nothing serious should ever happen to Soviet troops. Thus, direct Soviet participation in combat required a certain bending of the rules from both sides.[204]

Next came the Ogaden War. Open sources are even more scarce on the participation of spetsnaz here. The few sources that do exist point to a similar role to the one in Angola. The Soviet SOF officers were distributed to local Ethiopian detachments as advisers. As in Angola, relations between the local military and their Soviet advisers were not always cordial. Tareke Gebru, in his study of the wars in the Horn of Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, claims that the Soviet advisers often were "widely resented for their high-handedness, condescending attitude, stinginess and greed."[205] As in Angola, Soviet advisers found it difficult to train and advise from the rear. One Russian author,

Aleksandr Rozin, claims that the first Soviet military man to die in Ogaden was the Spetsnaz GRU Major Vladimir Sokolov. Somali forces shot down his helicopter in November 1977. He was at the time working as an adviser to the commander of an Ethiopian SOF brigade.[206] In addition, the father of Soviet spetsnaz doctrine, Pavel Golitsyn, was sent as an adviser to Ethiopia. He came as a representative of the GRU to assist in the development of Ethiopian intelligence. That capacity, according to him, did more or less not exist until the arrival of the Soviets. Golitsyn spent much of his time at the front embedded with Ethiopian units and was never injured.

Golitsyn recalls that one SOF task was impossible to get the Ethiopians to do.[207] They would flatly refuse to take part in deep reconnaissance behind enemy lines. Although it cannot be corroborated by open sources, Soviet spetsnaz most likely did this. It is unlikely that other parts of the Soviet military would have accepted the risk of sending their own people into operation without the type of intelligence that spetsnaz could provide. We know that Soviet spetsnaz was in the theater of operations, and we know that they had trained for such missions. The temptation to use them must have been massive if the local force could or would not do the job.

THE CRIMEAN SCHOOL OF INSURGENCY

More is known about the training of foreign fighters inside the Soviet Union compared to spetsnaz adventures abroad undertaken in the name of communism. The most important event was the establishment of the super-secret 165th Training Center at Perevalnoe, Crimea. One estimate suggests that as many as 18,000 fighters from liberation movements across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East may have trained at Perevalnoe in the 25 years that the center existed (1965–1992).[208] The center was not directly subordinated to spetsnaz or the GRU.

Instead, it was run by the Ministry of Defense's 10th Department, responsible for foreign military cooperation, although Spetsnaz GRU was responsible for the actual training.

The fact of the 165th's existence was highly classified, even to the other military units in Crimea.[209] Different groups of international "students" would be flown in to Simferopol late at night on nonregistered flights. Next, they were hustled off to Perevalnoe in buses with blinded windows. Training concentrated on deep reconnaissance and diversionary operations behind enemy lines. There was a major difference from the onsite training missions in Angola and Ethiopia, where spetsnaz trained various types of government forces: those who arrived at Perevalnoe were mostly nonstate rebels. Thus, the Soviet trainers needed to change their mindset from counterinsurgency to insurgency.

The first contingent, a group of 75 fighters from the tiny African nation of Guinea-Bissau, arrived in Perevalnoe, in the summer of 1965. In 1963, Amilcar Cabral, among the most effective insurgent leaders fighting the Portuguese, had instigated an armed rebellion against the colonial power to make Guinea-Bissau an independent country.[210] Soviet leadership soon found his cause worthy of support. That was partly because the KGB saw the Portuguese colonies in Africa as the most likely to take the lead in a general anti-imperialist revolution.[211] When Portugal finally gave up its colonies in 1974–1975, this was an occasion for joyful celebration at Perevalnoe.[212]

In the beginning, most of the students were from Africa. After 1980, however, the 165th started to take students from Asia and the Middle East. At the same time, the training period increased from one to two years.[213] In 1965, the Soviet political and military leaderships were relatively new to this business. They seemed to have assumed that logistical facilities, skilled instructors, and good interpreters in the languages of the colonial powers would be enough to make the training center work. After all, the military part of the training was more or

less the same as that provided to new recruits in the Soviet spetsnaz.[214] In practice, however, a number of unforeseen challenges complicated the undertaking.

First, foreign-language training turned out to be far more complicated than expected.[215] The colonial populations' command of Euro-pean colonial languages was weaker than Soviet authorities had anticipated. For example, according Vladilen Kinchevskii, commander of the 165th when the Guinea-Bissauians trained there, it turned out that only 10 of the 75 freedom fighters spoke Portuguese. The rest spoke a variety of local languages. A few of the 10 Portuguese speakers were able to translate into some of those, but many fighters received instructions nonverbally.[216] This became more challenging as topics of instruction became more theoretical. Dmitrii Zubarev, who worked as a Spanish interpreter at Perevalnoe from 1974 to 1976, recalls that he had grave doubts about how much of the original message got through after such double translations.[217] As a majority of the students were illiterate, there was no possibility to confirm the transfer of knowledge through written tests.

Second was the issue of political education. To the Soviets, the students were not only insurgents but rather the vanguard in establishing communism back in their home countries. Thus, political education was seen as no less important than learning the tactical and operational skills. This often came as a surprise to the foreign students. Zubarev remembers how the first lesson in Marxism–Leninism took place for a group of freshly arrived Africans:

> The lecturer in Marxism–Leninism directed his pointer to the portrait of a white-bearded man placed on a map of Germany and exclaimed triumphantly "In 1818 Karl Marx was born in Trier!" The importance of this message, however, was not immediately obvious to the students in the room. Many had never even seen a map before, and here some guy was directing his pointer to a dot

> on a sheet of paper telling them that this bearded grandfather was borne in that spot, and they were supposed recognize the momentous bearing of this fact on their own personal futures.[218]

Most students simply endured these compulsory lectures, but some protested. In 1983, a group of four officers from Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's Libya disembarked at the Simferopol airport. Upon arriving at Perevalnoe, they immediately declared they were there to learn sapper and demolition skills only. They had no need for instruction in the Russian language or political economy.[219] In another example, the leader of a contingent of fighters from Mozambique became very upset when the Soviet political tutor suddenly started to insist on the need to fight the scourge of Maoism. For the Soviet instructors this was standard dogma after the 1956 Sino-Soviet split, but Mozambique still had close relations with China. The Mozambique group leader stated angrily that, if the lectures were to contain anti-Chinese propaganda, his people would not attend. Since the Soviet instructors were in no position to change official Soviet policy on China, the Mozambique group was simply exempted from further political education.

Third, relations were complicated beyond those between Soviet instructors and foreign fighters. With such a multinational body of students, conflicts among groups of fighters were difficult to avoid. Zubarev, the Spanish interpreter at Perevalnoe, remembers the arrival in autumn 1975 of a group of Palestinians. According to him, there were more problems in the first year of training with the Palestinians than there had been with all other groups in all the previous 10 years combined. It started when the Palestinians tried to smuggle US$10,000 into the country. Soviet border guards discovered and promptly confiscated the money. The Palestinians protested vehemently. Next, the Palestinians mistook fellow students from African countries for the cleaning staff. When told that the Africans were in fact peers, they demanded that all Palestinians be elevated to

officer rank to enjoy privileges denied to the Africans.[220] The Perevalnoe commander unceremoniously dismissed this demand, and the Palestinians went on strike, which lasted a month. After that, the commander felt compelled to ask Moscow for advice. In the capital, the political rather than the practical content of the training agreement with the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was the priority. So as not to further offend an important ally in the Middle East, the Perevalnoe commander was instructed to find a compromise with the upset strikers. The conflict ended with the Palestinians being granted a less restrictive spare-time regime than the other nationalities. Despite the obvious challenges to secrecy, the Palestinians were granted the right to visit the city of Simferopol between the hours of 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. on Sundays. Arafat's men, however, saw the new rule as carte blanche for all kinds of extracurricular activities. By the end of the first Sunday, Palestinians had been spotted in most major cities in Crimea.

As if this was not enough, a new group of Palestinians was brought to Perevalnoe while the first one was still there. These new Palestinians, however, were not members of Fatah. They were instead followers of the Baath Party in Damascus. At the time, there were severe frictions between these two political factions. Those discords were now imported to Crimea. The two groups fought each other most nights in the barracks, including with knives. To have any chance at mediation, the Perevalnoe commander Kalashnik started every morning by receiving a detailed briefing on the latest news about Palestinian political intrigue in the Middle East. Without such up-to-date knowledge, he would not be able to mediate between the warring factions and convince them that they should not fight each other but the common enemy of Zionism.[221]

Additional specialized training of foreign fighters on Soviet territory was achieved in 1969, when it was decided that the Soviet Union should also admit and train naval special forces from like-

minded countries in the developing world.[222] A new training unit for foreign frogmen (designated as the 137th MRP) was established on the island of Vulf in the approach to the city of Baku on the Caspian Sea. It was treated as a regular MRP, but its main job was to train foreign frogmen.

Despite all these problems, eyewitnesses still think that the spetsnaz training at Perevalnoe achieved many of its goals. Dmitrii Zubarev, notwithstanding his many recollections, gives a generally positive overall evaluation of the activities at Perevalnoe. He insists that in most cases the foreign students would reach a level of skill within their different specialties that could compare to those expected of a Soviet sergeant in World War II.[223] Aleksei Sukonkin summarizes the experience of Perevalnoe by stating that "graduates of this training center overturned governments in all corners of the world, killed and kidnapped enemies of communism, fought international imperialism and in many other ways put into action what they had learned."[224] Thus, if these observers are correct, and if fighting international imperialism and the capitalist system without risking escalation to major war was the yardstick, then Perevalnoe and the later 137th at Baku probably served their purposes.

Today, Russia is again trying to increase its political weight in Africa. The political message is no longer the defense of the international proletariat, although African countries are still encouraged to join forces with Russia against the exploitative and arrogant West. Additionally, the defense of traditional as opposed to liberal values is part of the package. Here, the symbolic significance of what spetsnaz and other Russian forces did on the continent, and of the training provided in the Soviet Union decades earlier, still has political currency. The joint history of anticolonial warfare is often on agendas when African and Russian leaders talk. In a July 2020 meeting between the foreign ministers of Russia, Egypt, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

of Russia warned his colleagues about European efforts "to forget the consequences that their colonial rule had on the African continent."[225] At the Russia–Africa forum in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea in October 2019, President Vladimir Putin proudly stated that "our cooperation, rooted in the period of the joint fight against colonialism, is strategic and longstanding."[226]

However, the main foreign engagement for the Soviet military—a decade of fighting in Afghanistan—is far less easy to celebrate. Russia developed an "Afghanistan syndrome." The Russian population became reluctant to endorse far-flung military adventures when so many men returned in body bags. This was an important reason why much of the fighting in Syria from 2015 took place without a large ground component and why Russia rushed to develop private military companies. It is the landmark spetsnaz experience in Afghanistan that we turn to in chapter 2.

2

HEROES OF A LOST WAR, 1979—1989

SzGRU Colonel Vasilii Kolesnik was not impressed.[1] A Ukrainian from the Poltava region, who as a child had seen both his partisan parents executed before his eyes by the Nazis, he was now staring at his superiors with complete incredulity. The Soviet Union's political leadership had decided to assassinate the president of Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin. However, nobody was willing to take charge of the operation. A group of top military and KGB officers had gathered in the office of General Soltan Magomedov, the main Soviet military adviser to the country. During the night of 25 December 1979, these men smoked and argued, pondering the question of operational leadership. At the end of the debate, the sword of Damocles would hang above Kolesnik's head. He was chosen to command the operation. Fully aware that if things went well his superiors would bask in the shine of success, he also dreaded that if all went south he alone would take the blame.

His commanders maintained that he was the natural choice, since he had come up with the best plan. The ensuing operation was Shtorm-333 (Storm-333). Later, however, when Kolesnik presented them with a written version of this marvelous plan, they balked. Both Magomedov and another general, Boris Ivanov, who headed the KGB advisory mission to Afghanistan, would approve the plan only verbally. Neither was willing, as would have been the normal procedure, to put their signatures to paper. Kolesnik thought to himself "we are here to figure out how to do what the leaders of our country have asked of us, but these miscreants are only concerned with saving their own asses in case of failure."[2] Still, he was not going to let them completely off the

hook. Standing right in front of them, he noted in ink on the first page of the document: "Plan approved by Main military adviser S. K. Magomedov and Main KGB adviser B. I. Ivanov. *Both declining to sign*." Then, he picked up the plan and left. When Kolesnik later, in Moscow, delivered his report on the operation to Minister of Defense Dmitrii Ustinov, the latter expressed surprise. He said that while he could understand why Magomedov, full of "Caucasian cautiousness," refused to sign (Magomedov was an ethnic Karachai from the North Caucasus), he could not understand why Ivanov did.

Kolesnik had been called into the office of the head of the GRU, Ivashutin, earlier, in early May 1979, seven months before the invasion. The latter was very much against Soviet military interference in Afghanistan, but if Soviet leadership decided to ignore his warnings, he wanted to be prepared.[3] Ivashutin ordered Kolesnik to go to Tashkent, the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Republic, to oversee the formation of a new Spetsnaz GRU nonpermanent task force. It was officially designated the 154th SzGRU Battalion but would later famously be known only as the "Muslim battalion," or "Musbat." The unit was to consist of 520 personnel, almost all from the different Muslim nationalities of the Central Asian Soviet republics. It became the first Soviet spetsnaz unit on the ground in Afghanistan, deployed to Kabul at the beginning of December 1979.

Magomedov's relations with Kolesnik and the Musbaty (soldiers of the Musbat) had started to sour already before they had even entered the Afghan capital. The talented, but very independent-minded, ethnic Uzbek commander of the battalion, Major Khabib Khalbaev, had decided to leave behind a vehicle that suffered engine failure along the way. He left it with only a repair crew to guard. Khalbaev reckoned it was more important to arrive in Kabul on time than to reach the city with all vehicles intact. Magomedov did not agree. He scolded Khalbaev for negligence. Khalbaev, however, did not react as expected in front of a Soviet general. He refused to repent. When Kolesnik arrived in Kabul three days later, Magomedov demanded that

Khalbaev be dismissed. Kolesnik, however, knew Khalbaev as very capable. He did not want to lose him. In the end, Kolesnik managed to talk the offended Magomedov out of pursuing the matter further.

Khabib Khalbaev already enjoyed something of a reputation in the Soviet military. During exercises in the Turkestan Military District (TMD) four years earlier, he had taken a bus full of air force officers of high rank as "prisoners." Capturing officers during drills was at that time just not done as being way outside the scheme of the exercise. Soviet military exercises tended to be "minutely scripted plays" in which there was very little room for experimentation or the unexpected.[4] Sergei Kalinichenko, who took part in the same drill, remembers that Khalbaev's exploit created a major scandal. The whole exercise was about to be called off. Superiors promised Khalbaev "divine retribution." Even so, the Uzbek defended himself by arguing that military exercises should simulate real battle. In an actual conflict, he claimed, these officers would have given valuable intelligence. To everybody's surprise there was no reprimand. Instead, Khalbaev's brigade commander made him an example to follow. Kalinichenko asserts that this incident not only made Khalbaev famous throughout the spetsnaz community; it also made clear to everyone that it was now acceptable to act, during exercises, as they would during war.[5]

The Musbaty were brought into Afghanistan so that the Soviet leadership could have a mobile, lightly armed, versatile, and culturally adept military unit that could resolve emergent tasks depending on how the situation developed. Their first assignment was to protect President Hafizullah Amin and his palace. They were posted to defending positions around the building.

The Soviet special interest in Afghanistan went back to the late 1950s and the rise of Nikita Khrushchev as General Secretary of the Communist Party. In contrast to Stalin, Khrushchev saw the developing world as important. He thought Afghanistan might serve as a model for how the Soviet Union should develop relations with this

part of the world.[6] Consequently, the Soviets invested economically, politically, and militarily in the country over many years. The close relations survived the 1973 change (from monarchy to republic) under Mohammad Daoud Khan and the 1978 "socialist" revolution led by General Secretary of the Democratic Party of Afghanistan Nur Muhammad Taraki. This was so, despite the fact that the Soviet leaders saw a communist transformation as highly premature.[7]

However, the relations did not survive the fact that second in chief Amin murdered President Taraki and took over power in the country. Among other things, the KGB found out that Amin had held consultations behind their back with American diplomats. The deputy US ambassador to Afghanistan at the time, J. Bruce Amstutz, who had conducted these talks with Amin, later recalled them as "stilted and unproductive." At the time, however, there was no way for the KGB to know they had been a failure.[8] The Soviets' suspicions (and especially those of the head of the KGB, Andropov) that Amin had or was on his way to defect to the Americans is the most common explanation for the Soviet decision to assassinate him.[9] This is confirmed by Vladimir Kriuchkov, who from July 1978 until the invasion was the KGB resident in Kabul. He later became head of the KGB. Kriuchkov argues that, after the revelations of Amin's contacts with the Americans, "as a great power we had no choice but to intervene."[10] Thus, Kriuchkov explains the Soviet motivation for the invasion as a classic case of competition for power. However, an additional and less geopolitical reason may have been Brezhnev's close personal relations with Taraki and his equally strong antipathy toward Amin. Kriuchkov recalls that Brezhnev took the news of Taraki's death very hard. He felt the murder was a personal tragedy for himself. Brezhnev had liked Taraki, and he had nurtured suspicions that life in Kabul may be dangerous for his friend without venturing to do very much about it. Kriuchkov, hinting that Brezhnev's emotions may have

been a contributing factor, states that Brezhnev was a man who was "easily offended and very devoted to his friends."[11]

Furthermore, even before Taraki's murder Brezhnev was already disapproving of Amin. Some years earlier, the latter had behaved offensively toward the Soviet deputy minister of the interior (and Brezhnev's son-in-law), Iurii Churbanov. As a member of an Afghan government delegation visiting Moscow, Amin had threatened Churbanov that unless the Soviet Union sent more weapons to Afghanistan the Afghans would buy them from West Germany instead. When Churbanov inquired how the Afghans could have the funds to do something like that even while they refused to pay for the weapons already provided by the Soviet Union, Amin rudely cut him off with the words "none of your business."[12]

Kolesnik asserts that the Soviets learned about Amin's murder of Taraki from him and his Musbaty. Their source was an Afghan officer who had too much vodka at a dinner party. The spetsnaz had thrown a party for the Afghan codefenders of the palace. In respect for the Afghans' religion, they had initially not planned to serve alcohol. On second thought, they decided to trick the Afghans by serving vodka from teapots. They wanted to see if maybe some of the Afghans would drink enough to loosen their tongue. According to Kolesnik, several of the Afghans happily drank from the vodka disguised as tea. In the ensuing atmosphere of camaraderie, one of the Afghans became careless. He lost what Kolesnik calls his "revolutionary vigilance." The Afghan admitted that he and another officer had suffocated Taraki with a pillow on Amin's orders. The Musbaty pretended as if nothing extraordinary had been said, but the next day they alerted the KGB, which sent an urgent message to Moscow with the shocking news.

No matter which of these causes was the most important for the decision to intervene, by the beginning of December 1979 Soviet leadership decided that Amin had to go. Some kind of temporary Soviet military takeover of the country was necessary. Thus, the

Musbaty, which until then had protected Amin, suddenly became part of an operation to finish him off. According to Kolesnik's plan, the intrusion into Amin's palace would be conducted by a mix of Spetsnaz KGB (or "Komitetchiki") and Spetsnaz GRU. The Komitetchiki were there under the command of General Drozdov, the subsequent founder of Vympel.

The rest of the attackers came from the Muslim battalion's 3rd Company. The Musbaty's main job was to get the Komitetchiki safely to the entrance of the palace. After that, they would stay outside as perimeter guards while the Komitetchiki rushed inside to kill Amin. The palace was protected by more than 2,000 Afghan troops. The spetsnaz would move forward in two groups. The first, Thunder, under the leadership of SzGRU Lieutenant Vladimir Sharipov, would consist of 20 operators from the KGB's Alpha group and 25 from the Muslim battalion. These would move on the palace from the east with five Boevaia Mashina Pekhoty (BMP) infantry fighting vehicles, five GRU spetsnaz and four KGB spetsnaz in each. The second, Zenith, under the leadership of SzGRU Lieutenant Rustem Tursunkulov, had a similar composition, but the Komitetchiki here came directly from KUOS and not Alfa. They would move on the palace from the west.

The operation was to start at 10 p.m. on 27 December. A few hours before that, the soldiers from both SOF—who until that moment thought they were there to defend Amin—were now suddenly informed that the Afghan president had become a national traitor. Supposedly, he had agreed to let the Americans deploy medium-range nuclear missiles to Afghanistan. It was necessary to take him out.

At the same time as the troops were issued extra ammunition and told why they were now to kill the man they originally had come to defend, a detachment from Amin's palace security guards suddenly turned up in the Muslim battalion's compound. The Afghans brought camel-fur blankets as a gift to the Russians to cope with the freezing Afghan winter. During the offloading of the blankets, one of the Komitetchiki recognized an Afghan security service colleague (from

Khadamat-e Aetlaat-e Dawlati—KhAD) among the defenders. He was dressed as a regular soldier. This was obviously suspicious. The Soviets decided to take no chances. They incarcerated the undercover agent. Due to a misunderstanding among the troops, however, the captive soon escaped. Now, they worried that the Afghans, based on information from the fugitive, may already be suspecting that the Soviets had transformed from defenders to attackers. Considering this, they decided to move the operation forward to 7 p.m. At 6:55 p.m., the Komitetchiki brought out a bottle of vodka and served each of the 45 attackers 100 grams each. In addition to the two main strike groups, a smaller detachment of Spetsnaz GRU under the leadership of Captain Anvar Sakhatov moved out slightly before the others to take care of three Afghan tanks. These were positioned in such a way that they could give the main thrust serious problems once the operation started. When Kolesnik heard Sakhatov's men engage in a firefight, he gave the order for the strike groups to move. Sharipov's five BMPs started with a roar and burst forward into the darkness.

Almost simultaneously, other Musbaty opened fire directly on the palace from four Shilka self-propelled antiaircraft guns. This weapon system was alien to spetsnaz. Thus, the Shilkas had come with officers from other services trained in their use. Sharipov's BMPs continued to dash forward, the first almost immediately hitting an Afghan soldier on patrol. The soldier was thrown up into the air and ended up under the belts of the next BMP. At the same time, Sharipov suddenly lost all communication with the other unit, but he pushed forward with his BMPs and quickly reached the palace. The driver of the first machine had miscalculated the distance to a wall when rounding a corner and got stuck. This immediately caused the BMP's engine to stall. This vehicle now blocked the road for the four others coming up behind. By this time, Sharipov's men had also come under heavy fire from palace guards. The Komitetchiki, riding on top of the BMPs, jumped off to hide behind the vehicles. The driver in the stuck BMP finally got the engine running again. After a few attempts, he was able to break loose

from the corner. The machine leaped onto the square in front of the palace, the disembarked Komitetchiki following immediately behind.

While the Musbaty engaged the palace defenders, the Komitetchiki sprinted unhindered into the building. However, seeing how easy that was, many Musbaty suddenly forgot all division of labor between themselves and their KGB colleagues. They stormed after the Komitetchiki into the building. Sharipov, shocked by his men's spur-of-the-moment decision to upend operational plans, dashed after in an attempt to halt them. He was, however, himself immediately stopped by a bullet to the shoulder. Lying on the ground, he was able to drag his body back to the BMP. There, he injected himself with a dose of the Soviet opiate Promedol. Sensing that one dose was not nearly enough, he sent his orderly to search for more. Sharipov waited for what to him seemed like an eternity for the orderly to return with the second dose. As soon as he had inoculated himself again, he heard one of the Komitetchiki shouting out to him from one of the windows above: "That's it, Amin is dead! We got him! Tell headquarters!"[13] This was indeed good news, but Sharipov felt he needed to make sure in person that the Afghan president was actually dead. Still in pain, he was able to pull himself up to the first floor. There, he saw Amin laying in nothing but his underwear, most of his left shoulder blown away. He called in: mission accomplished.

Even before Sharipov made for the eastern side of the palace, Tursunkulov had set his mix of Komitetchiki and Musbaty in motion on the western side of the hill. While Sharipov's men rode on BMPs, Tursunkulov's men had four Bronetransporter (BTR) armored personnel carriers. Their approach was longer than for Sharipov's men, including running up a flight of outside stairs. Tursunkulov could see that some in Sharipov's group were in trouble even before he and his own men reached the palace walls. When Tursunkulov's men reached the bottom of the stairs and disembarked from their vehicles, bullets were flying all around. Tursunkulov himself was hit twice while exiting the BTR. None of the shots, however, were debilitating. One

made a gaping hole in his helmet; the other hit him in the chest. In the latter case, an extra bullet magazine that he carried inside his uniform stopped the projectile. Tursunkulov's men initially took cover as best they could, but when their colleagues from Sharipov's group called for assistance, they nevertheless got up and ran the remaining distance. Also from this group many Musbaty, contrary to plan, followed the Komitetchiki inside the building.

The unplanned mix of Spetsnaz GRU and Komitetchiki inside the palace created complete chaos. In contrast to the Komitetchiki, the Musbaty had not seen any plans showing the inside of the building. Sharipov had pleaded with Drozdov before the storming to let the Musbaty do this, but the KGB commander had refused. Adding to the confusion was the fact that all Soviets were dressed in Afghan military uniforms and that almost all the Musbaty were Central Asians. Thus, neither clothing nor ethnic appearance distinguished them from the Afghan palace guards. The only workable sign of distinction between friend and enemy became whether or not someone could swear in Russian.

When Sharipov's and Tursunkulov's men advanced on the palace, the Shilkas were already firing. The plan had been that these would stop as soon as the spetsnaz reached the building. However, just as Kolesnik was about to give the order for the Shilkas to stop, one of Tursunkulov's BTRs fell into a ditch. In panic, the driver jammed all other communication within the operation for quite a while by constantly calling for assistance. Kolesnik was not able to get his message through to the Shilkas to stop. In the end, he had to send someone in person to tell the Shilkas to hold fire. This meant that for a short while the Shilkas were actually hammering on their own troops. One of Sharipov's BMPs had its side blown in by a Shilka shell.

Despite this incident and other mishaps, however, Shtorm-333 achieved its main goal. Amin was dead. The same day, the Soviets brought in Babrak Karmal as the new leader of Afghanistan. Total Soviet causalities were 10 dead and 35 wounded.[14] All survivors were

decorated upon returning home. However, according to Sharipov, the small-mindedness of a political officer darkened the celebration for the heroes of Shtorm-333. This officer had not taken direct part in the operation. When he learned that only those who had been at the palace would received an order or medal, he became envious. In retribution, he filed a report up the party line that the spetsnaz had pillaged the palace after the end of the battle. This report had its effect. All orders for those who had taken part in one of the most high-profile operations of the Soviet military were lowered by one degree.

Three years later, Sharipov received some chilling news. During a reunion of survivors from the operation, one of the Komitetchiki from Alpha thanked Sharipov in particular for his speed in reporting the death of Amin to headquarters. According to this Komitetchik, had that report come seven minutes later, multiple-launch rocket systems positioned at the local airport would have started to pound the palace regardless of whether Soviet forces were still there. The artillery bombardment would have been followed by a second storming of the palace by Airborne troops from the Vitebsk Brigade. Sharipov and the other palace attackers could have ended up dead together with Amin and his men. There had obviously been a backup plan in case the SOF failed to take the palace.

Despite his initial suspicions that the operation would bring few personal rewards, Kolesnik was repaid with an admission to attend the General Staff Academy. This had always been his dream. After the academy, Kolesnik was head of the spetsnaz section of the GRU from 1982 to 1992. He traveled frequently to Afghanistan.

Sharipov shifted to a long career in the regular army and finally settled in Belarus. Given his partly Tajik background (his father was an ethnic Tajik), he was, after the fall of the Soviet Union, offered the position of minister of defense in the newly independent Tajikistan. He declined. Tursunkulov shifted from the army to the KGB and joined Vympel. He later returned to Afghanistan as a KGB adviser.

INTO AFGHANISTAN

The war in Afghanistan (1979–1989) is the defining chapter in the combat history of Spetsnaz GRU, and Shtorm-333 was their most high-profile Soviet operation.[15] This is so despite the fact that the Soviet Union lost that war. The reason is that Spetsnaz GRU fought better than most other parts of the Soviet military. Their importance in battling the mujahideen was out of all proportion to their small numbers. This judgment is not just Spetsnaz GRU self-glorification. Other parts of the Soviet military came to see it the same way. Even the mujahideen and their Pakistani advisers singled out spetsnaz as a particularly dangerous foe.

Still, not everybody has prized them equally high in the succeeding years. Perhaps not coincidentally, some of the harshest criticism of Spetsnaz GRU in Afghanistan has come from the VDV Airborne troops. Valerii Marchenko was a platoon commander in the reconnaissance company of the 103rd VDV Division in Afghanistan. He fought in that country from 1980 to 1981. Marchenko claims there was a common disregard for Spetsnaz GRU among VDV officers. They in particular abhorred what they saw as spetsnaz's lack of organization, poor intelligence collection, and excessive willingness to sustain losses. Many times, according to Marchenko, the losses in personnel were out of all proportion to the tactical and operational gains achieved.[16] While Marchenko may serve as a counterweight to the general praise of Spetsnaz GRU's fighting in Afghanistan, two things are important to keep in mind. First, Marchenko's personal experience is limited to the first two years of the war. This is the period when the whole 40th Army, spetsnaz included, was the most challenged in adapting to a war for which they had not trained. Second, the actual points of criticism tend to reflect the historical grievances toward spetsnaz among VDV officers that we have seen before. This

does not mean that Marchenko is wrong, but it suggests that institutional bias may have colored his judgments.

There was nothing in Spetsnaz GRU training prior to the war that suggested they would take on a very important role in Afghanistan. As we have seen, they had trained mostly for deep-area action such as special reconnaissance or the capture and destruction of strategically important targets. In Afghanistan, however, since the mujahideen blended into the population, there was no clear front line and therefore no easily identifiable deep area. War happened everywhere. True, for a short period in the winter of 1980 the mujahideen actually fought in relatively large formations, but they sustained heavy losses. Thus, already by the beginning of 1981 they had completely shifted to the tactic they would maintain throughout the rest of the war. This was to fight in small groups of 20–30 people. The exception was when they attacked Afghan centers of political power to demonstrate force. In those cases, they would expand to as many as 150 to 200 troops.[17] Their strategy was not to destroy the enemy but to make him suffer so much that in the end he decided to leave. That, in fact, is also what happened with the Soviets in 1989 and with Western forces in 2021.

Furthermore, the decentralized nature of an insurgency, with numerous independent and lightly armed groups (the Soviets estimated that mujahideen at one time may have consisted of as much as 1,500 different groups), meant that there were few or any objects that would provide strategic advantage to destroy. True, there were objects of significant tactical and maybe even operational importance, such as armories, that Spetsnaz GRU had a special role in finding and destroying. None of them, however, could be said to have strategic significance in the sense of setting back the insurgency in the country as a whole. Thus, deprived by the character of the war from fulfilling the original role of spetsnaz, head-on combat with the enemy using armored vehicles, artillery, and air support would now take up most of their time.

There were in particular three reasons why spetsnaz and not any other part of the military ended up in the front seat. First, Spetsnaz GRU had been allowed to pick off the cream of the new recruiting crop since the force's foundation. Thus, they had the best-motivated and individually most capable soldiers. Second, even within the very hierarchical Soviet military, Spetsnaz GRU had been able to install at least some culture of independent thinking and initiative. This fact gave Spetsnaz GRU a higher potential for adaptation and innovation than the regular army units.[18] Third, much of the fighting took the form of small-scale skirmishes and clashes in mountainous terrain. The Soviets' regular army, organized and trained for battles in large mechanized formations on the European plains, was never fully able to convert to the small unit operations necessary in Afghanistan. For spetsnaz, however, small unit maneuver was their specialty.

In summary, Spetsnaz GRU was far from perfect for taking a leading role in the counterinsurgency, but it was probably the best instrument the Soviet military had. General Boris Gromov, who served three tours in Afghanistan and was commander of the 40th Army for the last two years of the campaign, states in his memoir that spetsnaz played a "massive role" in the war.[19] The enemy thought the same. Brigadier General Mohammad Yousaf, who was the Pakistani coordinator for the mujahideen from 1983 to 1987, was very dismissive of the fighting abilities of Soviet soldiers in general. However, he made a significant exception for the Airborne troops and even more for spetsnaz.[20]

Among Soviet military leaders, there had been widely differing expectations about what awaited them in Afghanistan. While Ivashutin, head of the GRU, had warned of a "Soviet Vietnam," First Deputy Defense Minister Marshal Sergei Sokolov had quipped that he could not imagine "what exactly these peasants in wide trousers may do to us?"[21] Based on the Soviet General Staff's own postconflict analysis, it is plain that Sokolov's assessment had been much more

pervasive than Ivashutin's. The General Staff assumed that just the sight of significant numbers of Soviet troops on Afghan soil would be enough to deter any form of armed resistance against the new rulers in Kabul. Actual fighting was unlikely to take place.[22] The Soviet forces would simply stay for a short while to demonstrate strength, then leave behind them a secure and stable pro-Soviet communist regime under Babrak Karmal.[23]

Colonel Nikolai Kuzmin was an intelligence officer with the 58th Motorized Rifle Division. This 12,000-man force crossed the border at Kushka into the western part of Afghanistan during the early morning of 29 December 1979. When nearing Herat on icy roads and under heavy snowfall, Kuzmin got his first impressions of the Afghans:

> I saw an unhappy, forgotten people standing along the road in galoshes without socks and clothes the kind of which I had only seen in historical films. Despite this horribly deficient attire, none of them seemed to care about the snow and the cold. . . . It was all misery, primitivism and savagery. . . . Nobody in their right mind could imagine that this crowd would put up resistance against us.[24]

General Boris Gromov, who led the 5th Motorized Rifle Division during the invasion, remembers that even at the end of January 1980, a month into the invasion, he did not believe his troops would have to take part in combat. True, by that time mujahideen had started to engage in a few irregular and nonintensive firefights with Soviet forces, but the troops still expected quiet days. For Gromov, this opinion did not change until one of the last days of January. At that time, an envoy from the General Staff came to Afghanistan to tell the troops that, based on new intelligence, it was now certain they would have to do some fighting. Before that, they had not even started preparations for such an eventuality.[25]

The idea that the mighty Soviet war machine could scare the "peasants in wide trousers" into submission was shared beyond the Soviet borders. Some Western observers, comparing Afghanistan with the US experience in Vietnam, predicted that the Soviets were more likely to win. This was because logistics would be easier and because they had fewer inhibitions against brutality. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, serving under President Jimmy Carter, feared that the Soviets would be able to repeat what they had done in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. He wrote that "we should not be too sanguine about Afghanistan becoming a Soviet Vietnam," and he argued that "the guerrillas are badly organized and poorly led. They have no sanctuary, no organized army, and no central government."[26] According to a contemporary report in the *New York Times*: "Should the Russians overwhelm the insurgents with a swift offensive, they will add a new and strategically important satellite to their power system."[27] Others, however, warned that Afghanistan was not Czechoslovakia. They suggested that the Soviet technological superiority might account for less in the Afghan mountains than on the streets of Prague.

Spetsnaz had played an important role in securing the capital and killing Amin. There was, however, much less certainty about how useful they would be in the occupation itself. They were too few to control cities and roads, too lightly armed to deter potential troublemakers with displays of overwhelming firepower. Both the Musbaty and the Komitetchiki were sent back to the Soviet Union in early January 1980. The officers were distributed to different units all over the country, and the privates demobilized. All received strict instructions never to talk about Shtorm-333.[28]

SPETSNAZ RETURNS

Spetsnaz GRU were back in Afghanistan already at the beginning of February 1980. More or less at the same time as the Musbaty were sent into the country to protect Amin, the standing 459th Independent Special Forces Company had been made ready in Chirchik. These now took the place of the Musbaty. The company initially consisted of no more than 112 men. As with the Muslim battalion, only some of the commanders were Slavs. The rest came from different Central Asian nationalities. Since an insufficient number of Central Asians had undergone spetsnaz training, most of the soldiers in the 459th had ordinary infantry background. The Soviet military leadership assumed that in this case cultural and language skills would be more important than spetsnaz training, even in spetsnaz units. That judgment is especially unsurprising given expectations of limited combat.

The 459th was located to Kabul, thus the name "Kabul Company." Initially, being alone as special operations forces, it had the whole of the country as its theater of operations. The men of the 459th had only vague ideas about what awaited them. Most of the intelligence was still reserved for the higher ranks. The rank and file got most of their information from talking to returning Musbaty. The latter emphasized the cold climate of Afghanistan. Thus, the men in the 459th looked at the clothing they had been issued and started to supplement it with civilian merchandise paid from their own pockets.[29]

In March 1980, the 40th Army leadership decided that the 459th should do close area surveillance from helicopters of areas surrounding regular army units. This was not something they had ever trained for, but they still eagerly took to the mission. It beat the boredom of camp. Three different groups were sent from Kabul to Gardez, Kunduz, and Masar-i-Sharif respectively to do this job. The deployments led to the first taste of combat in Afghanistan after Shtorm-333. From the air, a group under the command of Lieutenant Mikhail Lukomskii spotted a party of six Afghans driving in two Soviet-made lorries. Lukomskii got suspicious and ordered his two Mi-8 transport helicopters to land. The

spetsnaz got out, and the Mi-8s again ascended to provide cover. The surprised Afghans abandoned the lorries as soon as they saw the helicopters land. Lukomskii's men went over to the vehicles and discovered large amounts of weapons loaded onto both trucks. They had just started to unload these trophies when the Afghans suddenly returned and opened fire. Lukomskii decided to evacuate. At that time, a very serious flaw in the training and equipment of Soviet SOF became apparent. There was no radio communication with the helicopters, and Lukomskii had not though of any procedures for how to get the pilots back down to pick up himself and his men. Luckily, the pilots understood Lukomskii's desperate gesticulations. The whole group was able to evacuate with most of the confiscated weapons even as they were under constant fire.[30]

There were two main phases in Spetsnaz GRU's warfare in Afghanistan. In the first phase, from 1980 to 1984/1985, their deployment was often random, and they played a kind of jack-of-all-trades role. This did not allow them to specialize and become really good at anything. They were few, the leadership of the 40th Army had a limited understanding of their specialization, and they were often left to themselves to look for things to do. Still, they would sometimes also deploy for missions where their previous training had some relevance. This included special reconnaissance and the capture of high-value targets (individuals). Nevertheless, they would also be wasted by guarding strategic objects or doing other jobs that easily could have been done by lesser trained and specialized troops.[31]

In the second phase, from 1984/1985 to 1989, spetsnaz numbers were boosted. They also discarded some of the heavier weapons carried during the first phase, and they concentrated efforts on preventing caravans bringing supplies to the mujahideen from entering the country. For this job, they received new equipment such as an independent and better working radio communication system, noiseless firearms, and more sophisticated demolition gear.[32]

In the first phase, the Soviets had devoted considerable energy to destroying mujahideen regional bases.[33] According to the Soviet General Staff's own postconflict analysis, by 1984 it was clear that this strategy had failed. The estimated size of the mujahideen opposition had in fact tripled during that period. Thus, after 1985, large-scale field operations against the enemy were mostly abandoned. There were up until the end of the invasion some major exemptions, but the main bulk of the forces would now concentrate on "retaining strategically important regions and lines of communication."[34] Spetsnaz would stop caravans and fight smaller mujahideen strongholds in the mountains.

One of the first spetsnaz raids on a village was led by Lieutenant Nikolai Gubanov. This took place in the Charikar Valley in Parwan Province in northern Afghanistan in December 1980. At 8 a.m. one day Gubanov was called to a meeting at the intelligence section of the 40th Army. This section had now established itself on the second floor of the late President Amin's palace. Reports said that a group of mujahideen leaders would meet in a particular village for a coordination meeting. A local Afghan had provided this information, and he would personally guide an 11-man spetsnaz detachment to the settlement. Leadership considered the operation pioneering. Military leaders at all levels all the way back to Moscow would follow it closely.

Since this type of mission had never been part of Gubanov's training, and since nobody around had done anything similar, Gubanov understood he had to improvise. After being transported partway by BTRs, the men started entering the foothills one after the other with the Afghan informant in front. A sergeant named Sidorov followed immediately after the informant. His order was to shoot the Afghan without hesitation if the raid turned out to be a setup. When the Afghan at one time unexpectedly diverted from the track to relieve himself, Sidorov almost killed him. When they were 500 meters from the house where the suspected mujahideen meeting was to take place, the village dogs betrayed them with some incessant barking. Someone

from the village yelled *Dresh!* (Stop!). Since this caller received no response to his warning, a storm of bullets came down the alley toward the spetsnaz. They all took cover, and Sidorov in response threw a grenade at the house. The grenade exploded with a deafening boom, and everything went quiet. When Gubanov and his men soon after entered the house, they saw that all but one of the gathered had fled. The spetsnaz torched the house, warned the owners that from now on all who housed mujahideen would be punished by death, and returned to Gardez.

Gubanov and his men continued to do many similar raids in the villages of this area. What is striking about his memoir is the openness about the brutality exercised toward the civilian population in this early phase of the war. The episodes of ruthlessness that he describes are not emotional acts of revenge by soldiers and low-level commanders for things the Afghans had done to them. Instead, callousness seems to have been part of recommended tactics.

Two weeks after the first raid, Gubanov and his men were going on a similar mission to another village. This time their order was clear: if there were mujahideen in the house, the spetsnaz should kill everyone, including women and children. It is hard to see any other motive for such an order than to scare locals from supporting the mujahideen. When the spetsnaz entered the suspected house, they found five adult males inside. Through an interpreter, these men conveyed to Gubanov that they were communists from the local party cell. The spetsnaz, however, had already been informed that this would be the standard mujahideen cover story. Dismissing any claim of adherence to Marxism–Leninism, the spetsnaz beheaded all five with the help of detonating cords. Gubanov recalls with heavy understatement that his men were "not in a festive mood" when they returned to Kabul after this operation.[35]

Later, the same detachment was on its way to yet another village. Several raids on Soviet troops had originated from there. Gubanov recalls that his superiors had been insistent before the group's

departure: he would not come home without results. There was a green light to do whatever would be necessary to get them. The spetsnaz entered the village at night and gathered all villagers able to stand on their feet in the village square:

> They just stood there, looking at us sullenly. Through the interpreter, I asked who had fired at the Soviet troops and where the weapons were hidden. I could myself hear how absurd the question sounded. How it from the beginning was doomed to fail. It was time for harsher measures. At my initiative, one villager was chosen from the crowd. There was no terror in his eyes, only hatred. He already knew the rules of the game. I gave him twenty seconds to name the shooters or die. . . . There was no sound until he got a bullet to his head and fell. I chose the next one. . . . The pile of bodies kept rising.[36]

After executing an unknown number of villagers, and not getting a single piece of valuable information, Gubanov and his men left the village. They warned the villagers that, if there was any more shooting from this village in the future, spetsnaz would be back to finish what they had started. Every man, however, knew they would not dare to go back there. Returning to that village would be worse than suicide. Gubanov laconically ends the story by saying that "the action did not contribute to the popularity of our forces in Afghanistan."[37]

In yet another example of a village raid, the well-known spetsnaz commander Vladimir Kvachkov was in charge. In January 1983, he led a group from the 177th Spetsnaz Detachment to the village of Vaka in the Surobi District in Kabul Province. Army intelligence claimed, based on new information, that a large caravan had unloaded there. Kvachkov would lead the third company of the 177th, traveling on BMD infantry fighting vehicles and supported by three MBTs. Additionally, a company of between 50 and 60 troops from the Afghan

army would also be under his command. The spetsnaz would block all entrances to the village while the Afghans searched the houses for weapons. Kvachkov and his men easily took control of the village, but they could not find any trace of the caravan. According to Kvachkov, when the Afghan soldiers could not find what they were looking for, they instead engaged themselves in "the usual looting." While this pillaging was going on, the spetsnaz increasingly came under fire from mujahideen who had left the village when the soldiers arrived and then taken up positions on higher ground. Kvachkov called "Opera," the code name for army intelligence headquarters, and explained the situation. He told them the search had produced no results and that the troops increasingly were coming under fire. They wanted permission to leave. Opera, however, explained that HQ had great confidence in the intelligence on which the operation was based. HQ scolded Kvachkov for his lack of resolve and ordered him to search more thoroughly despite the danger to his troops. By now, however, Kvachkov had made up his mind that the information had been "just another fairy-tale" from GRU intelligence. He promised Opera he would continue the search, but he had no intention to do so. Exit, nevertheless, was still difficult. Despite two rounds of assistance from Mi-24 helicopter gunships, the spetsnaz were still completely pinned down by fire from the mujahideen. Sometime before midnight, the Afghan army troops quietly disappeared, and the spetsnaz were now left alone to fight off the enemy. The latter would occasionally call over to the Russians by megaphone: "Sons of Lenin, give yourselves up!" By now, however, Kvachkov knew that an artillery division was on its way from Surobi. Around 2 a.m. during the night, the artillery was in position. Soon, the combined firepower of the artillery and the remaining spetsnaz forced the mujahideen out of their high-ground hidings. Kvachkov returned to base emptyhanded at the cost of 13 dead and 25 wounded.[38]

A month after Gubanov's first raid, the political atmosphere in Kabul started to harden. It became clearer that things would not

develop as peacefully as anticipated. Now, the longtime head of the GRU and spetsnaz enthusiast Petr Ivashutin arrived on his first in-country visit after the invasion. Although there is no reason to believe he had rescinded his original opposition to the war, he nevertheless thought the opportunity should not be lost, that is, to see what spetsnaz could bring to the table in this very different type of war. He was not happy with what he saw. Ivashutin snorted that "just hovering around in helicopters is no good." He told the men "we are going to write text books based on what you are doing here. Afghanistan is your breaking in as a force. We have much more ambitious plans for you than this."[39] He was, unfortunately, less detailed about what these ambitions were. Still, most likely on his instruction, all helicopter surveillance missions stopped. The Gardez, Kunduz, and Masar-i-Sharif Detachments returned to Kabul. The 40th Army leadership, in an effort to placate Ivashutin, now tasked the 459th with conducting special reconnaissance in the areas close to the Pakistani border. These would be the first missions at least somewhat resembling what they actually had been trained on doing.

For example, regarding the new type of missions, the head of Army intelligence sent a detachment from the 459th to near the village of Alikheil close to the Pakistan border. They would stay there for five days to collect intelligence. Lieutenant Vladimir Somov was chosen to lead the detachment. Before departure, the political officers organized Communist Party and Komsomol assemblies among the men. Here, they talked with the fighters about political motivation and stressed the importance of secrecy. Furthermore, this was also an opportunity for army leadership to give instructions. In an illustration of how far from reality many Soviet officers were at this early stage, the 40th Army chief of staff kept insisting to Somov that they should "never move around in darkness, because they risked falling off cliffs or ⟦may⟧ get lost."[40] One of Somov's most important lessons after the operation

was that not only could SOF move around in mountains in the dark—they should! There were significant tactical advantages to doing so.

Two Mi-8s would take the detachment to the place where they would start the mission. Both aircrafts and pilots, however, turned out to be far less flexible that the spetsnaz had anticipated. Looking at the map, the pilots found only one area within reasonable distance from Alikheil where they could agree to set down their helicopters. The spetsnaz realized that helicopters could not land just anywhere.

After Somov and his men had descended and been on the ground for some time, they discovered two large groups of mujahideen. There were between 30 and 50 individuals in each, but Somov decided to take no action. Still, the spetsnaz ended up killing a civilian Tajik. He had drawn his knife on two men out on a patrol. That was the whole result of the first "spetsnaz-doing-spetsnaz-things" mission in Afghanistan.

In these early days, this minor operation was a big deal. Again, military leaders up to the General Staff in Moscow were informed about the fact that it would take place, and they took a deep interest in its outcome. They saw it as an experiment in what spetsnaz might be able to achieve in areas where the majority of Soviet forces would not be fit to roam. As soon as Somov returned to base, he was called into the office of the deputy head of the General Staff, General Sergei Akhromeev, to give a report. Akhromeev was visiting the 40th Army at the time. The dirt and dust covered Somov recapitulated what had happened, and Akhromeev asked him if he had learned anything that could improve similar missions in the future. Somov had a number of ideas. These included better binoculars; a possibility to communicate with helicopters other than with simple gesticulation or the building of campfires; and snipers issued with Dragunov sniper rifles and possibly camouflage uniforms.[41]

Throughout this first period of spetsnaz warfare in Afghanistan, there was a gradual strengthening of their presence. The General Staff decided to augment the capacity with two more companies similar in size to the 459th. The Musbat 154th SzGRU Company was

regenerated with some of the original fighters from Shtorm-333 and sent to Jowzhan Province in the north. They would later relocate to Jalalabad in the east in the second phase of the war. A new 177th Company, in which 50–60 percent of the soldiers were ethnic Uighurs, began training in Chirchik. They later deployed to Maimane in Fariab Province. These would go to Ghazni south of Kabul in the second phase. Both these units entered Afghanistan at the end of October 1981. The 459th continued to conduct special reconnaissance missions and raids all over Afghanistan until the spring of 1984. Because of this, the men in this unit came to call themselves the "firefighter company."

SPETSNAZ TENSIONS WITH THE REGULAR ARMY

Formally, Spetsnaz GRU in Afghanistan was subordinated to both the head of intelligence in the Turkestan Military District, GRU headquarters in Moscow, and the commander of the 40th Army.[42] In practice, however, they took the vast majority of their orders directly from the intelligence section (*razvedotdel*) of the last of these commands. Still, at least for the first two years, they also enjoyed significant autonomy. This was in particular true for the 154th.[43] This unit, stationed in the north of the country, acted mostly on its own initiative. The relative independence stemmed from the fact that regular army commanders still had little or no experience in commanding spetsnaz and the fact that they had little idea about what these forces could do. Attempts by army intelligence officers to exercise leadership over spetsnaz in ways common to the regular army often led to tensions and resentment. Gubanov remembers with great scorn how an army general would sometimes arrive at the company base early in the morning to count cigarette butts around their tents. This unwanted overseer reproached the men for not keeping their "neatness up to standard." In another episode, the same general

foolishly ordered them to take along sniper rifles for night raids into Afghan villages. In Gubanov's personal opinion, this particular general's "main assignment was to prevent us from fighting."[44]

VDV and army intelligence units would sometimes take part in missions jointly with spetsnaz. Here, there seems to have existed an unspoken counterinsurgency hierarchy of authority with spetsnaz in the lead. VDV had a selection and motivation similar to spetsnaz, although with less experience in small unit combat far removed from the main forces. A "secondary status" to spetsnaz in this kind of warfare can also be deduced from the fact that spetsnaz early on was given the job of training the VDV in counterinsurgency. This was so despite the fact that spetsnaz at this early stage had minimal experience in the trade themselves. Still, in the summer of 1980, 15 of the most trusted SzGRU commanders from across the Soviet Union were dispatched to Afghanistan. Their mission was to train the 103rd VDV Division in counterinsurgency. The main disciplines were small group tactics, demolition work, and the use of radio communication.[45]

Finally, the tactical reconnaissance units of the regular army formations also had some experience in acting independently from larger forces. These units did not receive any specialized training in counterinsurgency the way the VDV did, but they would sometimes augment spetsnaz if the latter planned to attack especially large mujahideen bases or convoys. A spetsnaz company commander, D. E. Liutyi, stated: "All spetsnaz in Afghanistan sooner or later had to fight together with regular infantry. However, I cannot remember a single spetsnaz officer ever mentioning such cooperation in a positive light."[46]

Ordinary motorized rifle units and the heavier elements of the army, such as artillery, would sometimes secure the perimeter or support spetsnaz missions from afar. This was also true for VDV units. Spetsnaz Major Evgenii Sergeev recalls how important his unit felt when a VDV battalion from Lashkargakh was dispatched to secure

the cordon of his own battalion in Shah Joi: "After two weeks a VDV battalion arrived from Lashkargakh. Their job was to guard and defend our base. It spoke volumes of the importance attached to our battalion that a unit which until recently itself had conducted the same types of ambushes as we did, now deployed in our defense."[47]

Tanks did not really play any significant role in the war, whether for spetsnaz or the rest of the army. After the first few years, most were sent back to the Soviet Union. The BMP tracked infantry fighting vehicle also had limited value. While moving, a BMP could be heard from several kilometers away. Furthermore, if it hit a mine, there was usually no way of getting the belt back on even if the crew and the hull survived. The vehicle and the men inside were sitting ducks. Thus, land mobility was mainly secured by BTR armored personnel carriers and by military trucks.[48] The BTRs were superior to the BMPs because they made much less noise and had more space for men inside. They were also better protected against mines. If a BTR hit a mine, often only one of the wheels would fall off. The vehicle could still move forward on the remaining seven wheels.[49]

A tricky point in the relationship between spetsnaz and the 40th Army was how to measure operational success. There was among the leadership of the 40th a natural tendency to focus on whatever could be counted. Quantitative measures are often more intuitive for evaluating progress than qualitative ones. Thus, the 40th's leadership, in reports back to Moscow, measured spetsnaz success in terms of the number of destroyed or captured mujahideen assets (bases, arms, vehicles, etc.). Obtained intelligence, for example, while potentially of higher operational and even strategic importance, was generally not included in these reports. Destroyed or captured physical assets could be added up, pieces of gathered intelligence less so. This bias toward quantitative evaluation may actually be one of the major reasons why spetsnaz did so little reconnaissance in comparison with direct combat in Afghanistan.[50]

Lieutenant Ianis Kushkis, who fought in the 459th from 1984 to 1986, found this predisposition of the 40th leadership highly dysfunctional. Increasingly, he felt, his unit would be sent on underspecified missions. The 40th Army officers just sent them to areas where they expected there would be a lot to destroy or capture. Kushkis thought such "capture and destroy missions" crowded out targeted missions against less "voluminous" but operationally more valuable targets. The latter may yield less destruction and capture, but they had the potential to bring in intelligence of high value. The leadership of the 40th, however, had to report its progress back to Moscow. That was always easier with numbers in hand.[51] Furthermore, in addition to a distorted understanding of progress, the quantitative fanaticism also encouraged deception. When there was little to count, the temptation to exaggerate was enormous. General Boris Gromov himself recalls that, after a largely unsuccessful operation near Kabul, "we, as was the tradition, still reported about a substantial catch."[52]

By the beginning of 1984, it was clear to the Soviets that their scorched-earth tactics for depriving the mujahideen of a domestic supply base had failed. The inflow of food and weapons across the borders from Pakistan and Iran compensated for losses. Unless those caravans stopped, mujahideen would be able to continue the struggle indefinitely. Therefore, in February 1984 Moscow decided to create "Zavesa" (Curtain), a nonpenetration zone along the border with Pakistan. Later, they added the border with Iran to this zone.

OPERATION ZAVESA (CURTAIN)

The new Zavesa strategy had profound consequences for spetsnaz. So far, they had been a capacity that the 40th Army could use here and there, with varying degrees of luck, in roles that the rest of the army

could not fulfill. Now, they became the spearhead of the most important element within the overall campaign. If Zavesa failed to cut mujahideen supplies from abroad, it was very likely that the whole campaign would fail. According to Gromov, by the spring of 1985, as much as 60 percent of the borders between Afghanistan and Pakistan and Iran had been placed under spetsnaz control.[53] A separate Zavesa cell within the command structure of the 40th Army led and coordinated the fight against the supply caravans.[54] Although Spetsnaz GRU still took part in other types of combat, they could now concentrate more on one particular type of mission and specialize. On any particular day, as many as 30 to 35 different spetsnaz groups might be attempting to intercept convoys. Between 10 and 12 of these would be conducting operations with the help of helicopters.[55] The mujahideen commander Akhmed Shah Masood complained that, after the boosting of the number of spetsnaz and the changes to their deployment contained in the Zavesa plan, "it has become a very hard war, far harder than before . . . their commandos have learned a great deal about mountain guerrilla warfare."[56]

Zavesa led to a substantial strengthening of spetsnaz in several respects. Four changes in particular increased combat capabilities in this period: (1) a substantial rise in numbers; (2) a halt to the practice of filling up spetsnaz units with personnel from other branches; (3) the introduction of two spetsnaz brigade staff elements to coordinate activities but also give the service more control over how the units were used; and (4) dedicated helicopter support. Getting all these changes up and running took about a year.

When Zavesa was approved in February 1984, Spetsnaz GRU in Afghanistan counted about 1,200 troops. They were organized into one company in Kabul (459th) and two battalions (154th and 177th) in the north of the country. At the peak of the Zavesa period, Spetsnaz GRU counted around 4,000 troops. These were organized into one company

and two brigades; each brigade again was subdivided into four battalions.

Table 2.1 Pattern of Spetsnaz GRU deployment after initiation of Operation Zavesa

Unit	Entry month	Province	Brigade	Number of troops
459th Company	February 1980	Kabul		100+
154th Battalion	October 1981	First Jowzhan, then Nangarhar in January 1984	15th	500+
177th Battalion	October 1981	First Fariab, then Ghazni in January 1984	15th	500+
173rd Battalion	February 1984	Kandahar	22nd	500+
668th Battalion	September 1984	Logar	15th	500+
334th Battalion	March 1985	Kunar	15th	500+
186th Battalion	March 1985	Zabol	22nd	500+
370th Battalion	March 1985	Helmand	22nd	500+
411th Battalion	December 1985	Farah	22nd	500+

Source: Sergei Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU Ocherki Istorii: Afganistan—Zvezdnyi Chas Spetsnaza 1979–1989 gg* (Moskva: Russkaia Panorama, 2009), 263–266.

All these units would hunt caravans, which could be attacked only on Afghan territory. Two spetsnaz battalions, however, were secretly prepared to go further by entering third countries. The General Staff feared that both Iran and China at some point might get involved in the conflict with their own troops. The 173rd Spetsnaz Battalion, consisting mostly of Muslims from the North Caucasus, was sent directly from the Soviet Union to Kandahar in early February 1984. They would fight caravans coming from Iran as well as from Pakistan, but in addition they would be ready to conduct covert operations inside Iran if intelligence showed that country was planning to get directly involved in the war. Similarly, the majority-ethnic Uighur

177th was sent to Ghazni to fight caravans from Pakistan, but it would also be ready for secret operations inside China.[57]

Each battalion, according to the plan, now consisted of 528 troops: 59 officers, 98 warrant officers, and 371 soldiers. In terms of functions, each battalion consisted of a staff element, two companies riding on the BTR-70 armored personnel vehicles, and one company riding on BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles. In addition, there were smaller units responsible for laying mines, Shilka self-propelled antiaircraft guns, communications, logistics and medical services.[58] A spetsnaz company would be able to deploy up to three squads (*razvedivatelnaia gruppa*) independently at any one time, but usually they deployed no more than two. Each squad would consist of 16–20 operators. These included the commander and deputy commander, two or three sub-squad commanders, two or three radio operators, and 10–12 regular fighters. At the beginning of each operation, the radio operator would establish connection with the center, and one or two regulars would be dedicated to defend this radio operator. The radio operators belonged to a special communications detachment directly subordinated to the battalion leadership. They were assigned to the squads for the duration of the operation. Most operations would last three to four days, and most groups would conduct operations at a distance of 30–80 kilometers away from base.[59] For reasons of secrecy, all the spetsnaz battalions would officially be designated as infantry battalions. Many spetsnaz serving in Afghanistan would never learn the real designations of the units in which they fought.[60]

Furthermore, the deployment of the 668th out of Kirovograd in central Ukraine to Logar in September 1984 signaled the emerging professionalization of spetsnaz. This battalion was the first not to consist mainly of Central Asian soldiers. More or less all the troops had undergone regular spetsnaz training. By this time, the Soviet military leaders had concluded that spetsnaz professionalism was more important than cultural and language skills.[61]

It was not until March 1985 that another three Spetsnaz GRU battalions were ready to be sent to the conflict. One went to Asadabad in Kunar Province (the 334th), one to Lashkargakh in Helmand (the 370th), and one to Zhardzhoi in Zabol (the 186th). Of these, the 370th took the mandate for professionalization most seriously. The battalion was set up by the head of intelligence in the Moscow military district, Major General Iakov Sidorov. For him, spetsnaz training alone was not enough. He wanted only the best. Thus, unlike many other commanders, Sidorov put a lot of effort into interviewing candidates. He also went out of his way to exploit all the personal connections he had established in various garrisons to obtain the best people.[62]

In addition to increases in the number of units and their professionalization, the Spetsnaz GRU brigade staff elements of the 15th and 22nd SzGRU Brigades were relocated to Afghanistan in April 1986. This meant that day-to-day leadership of the battalions shifted from the intelligence section of the 40th Army down to these brigade staff elements. The brigade staff of the 15th Brigade set up in Dzhelalabad in Nangarhar Province and took command of the 154th, 334th, 668th, and 177th detachments, and the brigade staff of the 22nd set up in Lashkargakh in Helmand Province and took command of the 370th, 173rd, 186th, and the newly established 411th. The latter had been set up exclusively from personnel already serving in Afghanistan. The 459th Kabul Company remained under command of the 40th Army. The staff elements shielded the battalions from some of the regular army's lack of understanding for SOF specificity, but they could not eliminate all armywide directives that took little notice of spetsnaz character. For example, in May 1986 the 40th Army leadership decided that all units should take with them at least one Utes 12.7mm heavy machine gun during all operations. The decision made sense for the largely mechanized regular army units, but it was not welcome in spetsnaz. The gun, because of its weight, made the normally lightly armed spetsnaz units significantly less mobile than

they otherwise would have been. On top of that, their firepower did not increase much.[63]

KRER AND OTHER STRONGHOLDS

One of the most prominent examples of spetsnaz intractability vis- -vis the army leadership was the operation against the Krer mujahideen base in Kunar Province in March 1986. After Shtorm-333, this is probably one of the most famous spetsnaz operations in the war, mostly because the fighting was taken into Pakistani territory, which was strictly forbidden. The Krer camp was located about 20 kilometers southwest of Asadabad and was the main headquarters for the Islamic Regiment of Abdul Wakil. Wakil had built his fortification on a ridge almost exactly on the Afghan-Pakistani border. It served as a strongpoint from which mujahideen could conduct raids on Soviet and Afghan government forces and also as a major logistics base.

Much of the initiative and planning for the operation against Krer came from the strong-willed commander of 15th Brigade, Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Babushkin. This heavy-set Russian with a big moustache, who had grown up in the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, was known for going his own way. Now, he wanted revenge for repeated attacks emerging from this base against his own forces.[64] The problem was that the commander of the 40th Army had prohibited any planned combat within a 15-kilometer exclusion zone along the border. Babushkin asked for permission to conduct ambushes of expected mujahideen forces at a ford across the Kunar River, outside the forbidden zone. All the while, however, he really planned to attack the fortified base inside the zone. As Sergei Kozlov, who also fought in the 15th Brigade, laconically recalled: "We had to resort to some cunning in order to get the go-ahead from the army."[65]

Babushkin decided to attack the base on 29 March. The main idea was for two Spetsnaz battalions advancing from different sides to overpower the mujahideen guarding the camp before sunrise. The 154th and 334th Spetsnaz Battalions, each with the support of one artillery battery of D-30 122mm howitzers and one platoon of Grad truck-mounted multiple rocket launchers, would conduct the operation.

The 334th, advancing on the base from the north, would engage the mujahideen first. This was the direction from which the enemy would expect to be attacked. While fighting took place in the north, the 154th would climb up some incredibly steep cliffs from the south and surprise the mujahideen from the rear. Initially, things went largely according to plan. As the mujahideen were preoccupied with fighting the 334th, the 154th entered the ridge more or less undetected. By 4 a.m. on 29 March, the latter battalion was in a position where it could fire directly down on the mujahideen below. Many mujahideen died, but some managed to escape into Pakistan. To prevent runaways from coming back with reinforcements, a company from the 154th progressed onto some elevations in the terrain from where they could better be able to stop counterattacks. These heights, as the spetsnaz very well knew, were on Pakistani territory.

Soon, the mujahideen counterattack began, and it was far stronger than the 154th could hold. After a while, the Afghans had retaken the initiative. Only calling in Soviet helicopter gunships, Soviet artillery, and support from the 66th Motorized Rifle Brigade from Jalalabad prevented total annihilation of the spetsnaz. The gunships and the other assets forced back the mujahideen, but calling in the assistance was not possible without revealing to army leadership that the battle was actually taking place inside Pakistan. The leadership of the 40th did not take kindly to being duped. Babushkin was dismissed and returned home after Krer.

Village destructions continued as well after the start of Zavesa. One example is the raid against the twin villages of Khadirzai and

Delaki-Paiin in Kandahar Province in January 1987. These villages were located in an area controlled by the mujahideen warlord, Islamic Party founder, and later vice president of Afghanistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

According to information received from Afghan intelligence, on 10 January between 50 and 70 mujahideen would be gathered in the two villages for a one-day rest. Moreover, and perhaps more important, they would be carrying with them a large metal box most likely containing important documents and possibly much of the Islamic Party's savings. Seizing that box could give a decisive future Soviet advantage against this group.

The area was the responsibility of the 173rd Spetsnaz Battalion, stationed at Kandahar Airport. The two villages were located close to each other in a narrow valley and separated only by hill some 70–100 meters high. There were between 30 and 50 compounds in each village. The sides of the valley were steep, and the spetsnaz expected there would be several fortified positions with either 12 7mm or 14 5mm heavy machine guns entrenched in the sides.

The operation was in excess of what one spetsnaz company could do alone, especially because at least 15 troops were down with different kinds of diseases at the time. It was decided that the approximately 50 spetsnaz would attack in three groups. Normally, they would only dispatch one or two groups. Thus, all three groups would be somewhat understrength during the raid. Still, most of the men welcomed the task. There had been no significant action for more than a week, and the men were tired of the strict in-camp training regime. As was often the case, few men would know anything about where they would go or whom they would fight until the operation started. Those who knew had serious conversations with KGB counterintelligence on the need to maintain secrecy. Everybody was aware of the incredible efficiency of mujahideen intelligence.

In the early morning of 10 January, all three groups were loaded into three Mi-8 transport helicopters at Kandahar Airport. They

started flying toward the villages accompanied by two Mi-24 helicopter gunships. A number of Su-25 ground attack aircraft stood ready for backup at the airport. The group assigned with Private K. V. Kluiev was in the first Mi-8. Their job was to take control over the hill between the two villages. From that position, they could cover the other two groups as they started clearing the villages. The helicopter ride was only about 30 minutes. As soon as Kluiev's Mi-8 exited the narrow gorge they had used to get as close to the target as possible without exposure, they met furious fire from the ground. Bullets ricocheted off the helicopters' body with increasing frequency. More and more of them also started breaking through the armor. The helicopter answered fire as best it could, including with heavy machine guns and unguided rockets. From what the men could see from above, there were at least twice as many mujahideen on the ground as the 50–70 of which intelligence had informed. Soon, a pilot with crazed eyes emerged from the cockpit. He screamed at the spetsnaz to get out immediately. The helicopter was still five to six meters above the ground and moving, and the terrain below consisted of big boulders. Kluiev was first in line. As he himself remembers, there was no time to weigh the pros and cons of jumping onto the boulders: "It was my very firm impression that all the men behind me were more than ready to get out of this coffin with propellers."[66] Downloaded with 12 kilograms of ammunition, he hit the ground first. As soon as he landed, the stand of his grenade launcher came down next and hit him on the head. Despite this, he was able to instantaneously roll away to prevent a 100-kilogram Armenian named Arutonian who was following from falling on top of him.

The Mi-8 sped away, and in a very short time the men had grouped out and assembled the AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher and the Utes 12 7mm heavy machine gun. The two other groups also descended successfully. Kluiev's group concentrated their fire on the mujahideen's fortified positions in the valley sides. They quickly spotted three of them armed with DShK heavy machine guns. There

were also a number of smaller ones armed with smaller machine guns. The AGS-17 could hit a target with great accuracy out to 800 meters, and the Utes could ram with precision almost two kilometers away. After 15 minutes of intense fire, all fortified mujahideen positions had gone quiet. In Kluiev's group, the only casualty was one of the Utes operators who suffered a slight hand injury.

While Kluiev and his group had taken care of the fortified positions, the two other groups were closing in on Delaki-Paiin. However, heavy fire from the village held them back. Some mujahideen running from Khadirzai to assist their brothers in Delaki-Paiin were cut down by renewed fire from Kluiev and the others on the hill. A group of about 10 mujahideen then turned around and tried to storm the hill. These, however, were easy targets for the men above. Several were killed, and the rest ran for cover. At the same time as this fighting took place, the rumble of Su-25s could be heard in the distance. Suddenly, in no time the whistling of 250kg bombs cut through the air and started to hit Delaki-Paiin. Kluiev remembers: "The ground moved as if our hill was not a small mountain but a raft in a stormy sea. Houses and trees were thrown into the air like splinters. They fell down again like in a slow movie. . . . By the time we dared to rise our heads, our guys had already taken control of the first village."[67]

Three hours after the initiation of the attack, the magical metal box containing at least part of the Islamic Party's treasure had been confiscated. Sixteen mujahideen were taken prisoner. The local head of the mujahideen was dead, and the Soviets had confiscated over 100 pieces or firearms. The Su-25s had shattered both villages. The mission was accomplished.

This brutal and exceptionally uneven battle was a clear victory for the 173rd, but tragedy still struck when they were about to return. One of the Mi-8s crashed during takeoff, either due to a lucky shot from some mujahideen still remaining in the hills or to pilot error. Unfortunately, this helicopter carried two extra fuel tanks. These soon

exploded in a ball of fire. Some of those on board managed to evacuate before the explosion, but three men burned to death in the wreckage.

ON COMMUNIST LOYALTY

Ever since the Bolsheviks had to rely on the service of former Tsarist officers during the Russian Civil War (1918–1921), there had been units responsible for ensuring the communist loyalty of Soviet troops. The country's leadership was convinced that the political zest among troops needed to be constantly reinvigorated and monitored. Two agencies with slightly different roles were in charge of this process. First, within the military organization, Political Departments existed on most levels. Usually, the deputy commander of any particular unit was the political officer, or *zampolit* (deputy head for political affairs). This individual had received special training in the canons of communism, and his responsibility was to make sure that soldiers stayed correctly motivated and knew what they were fighting for. Second, the KGB operated its own Special Departments within military units. These consisted of officers from the KGB's Third Chief Directorate responsible for counterintelligence in the military and the police. These departments existed in all military units down to the regimental level, and their operators were called *osobisty*.[68] The Special Departments screened troops based on their civilian records for expected reliability and ideological purity prior to enrollment, and they created informer networks among the troops to make them spy on and monitor each other. Thus, roughly speaking the zampolity strived to produce communist enthusiasm and the osobisty monitored the effects.

The Soviet population was accustomed to political surveillance. The fact that one could never know whether any acquaintance might inform to the KGB was nothing out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, this

system still created distrust within the armed forces and between the armed forces and the KGB. V. P. Kovtun, who was a squad commander within one of the companies of the 186th SzGRU Battalion, provides one example. He claims that, when he declined a proposition from the osobist overseeing his battalion to tatter on his comrades, the KGB officer falsely reported him to the military legal authorities for having executed innocent civilians.[69] If true, this may have been both an instance of revenge and a demonstration to others of what may happen if they turned down propositions from osobisty. The scale of osobist activity was substantial. KGB Major Nikolai Duiunov was an osobist who worked in the Special Department of the 103rd VDV Division in Afghanistan from 1981 to 1983. He recalls that every osobist was expected to run a network of between 55 and 60 informers among the troops under his observation.[70]

In practice, the work of the Political Departments and the Special Departments often overlapped. It was a mix of political teaching and control and also of sorting out disciplinary issues. They fought against problems such as drunkenness, ethnic conflicts among the troops, and corruption. Most Afghan military memoirs do not really reflect much annoyance with the facts of political propaganda and political surveillance in themselves. This was an everyday occurrence for Soviet citizens. However, the recollections do point in particular to two negative consequences of this activity.

First, the Political Departments and the zampolity would sometimes meddle in military decisions. Their instructions were not to do so, but sometimes it could be hard to distinguish between a military decision and a political one. Some zampolity probably also lacked insight into their own limitations when it came to military affairs. Lieutenant Gennadii Dolzhnikov remembers one example of uncalled-for zampolit meddling during the first phases of Operation Zavesa. The unit in which Dolzhnikov served, the 370th SzGRU Battalion in Helmand, was severely underperforming in comparison with

neighboring battalions in Kandahar and Zhardzhoi. Dolzhnikov insists that a major reason for this underperformance was the activities of the battalion's Political Department. Excessive zampolit guardianship deprived the commanding officers of the battalion of all initiative and freedom of maneuver.[71] Here, it is important to remember that disregarding the advice of the zampolit was risky. The Political Departments accrued much power from the fact that it was them who wrote the officers' appraisal reports. A negative appraisal report could stop any officer's career.

Second, substandard performers in the regular chain of command were at least in principle possible to jettison. The postings of zampolity, however, were separately controlled by the military's political organs. Seargent Magomed Idrisov, who fought in the 173rd Battalion in Kandahar, remembers that the biggest problem with zampolity was that it was impossible to get rid of those who were incompetent. Over time, Idrisov developed a strong dislike for a number of these "engineers of human souls" as he called them.[72]

Still, the experience with political officers could also be positive. In the best cases, they could fulfill the important function of a "human resources" officer. They would monitor and improve combat moral for the commander.[73] It is important to remember that the Soviet armed forces did not have a NCO system in the way many Western militaries did. Furthermore, given that their training was not just ideological but also military, it is likely that at least some of them would be good soldiers. D. E. Liutyi, who was a company commander in the 173rd SzGRU Battalion, recalls that his zampolit was an excellent warrior who usually took charge of the armored unit of the company. He adds, however, that such combat professionals among the zampolity were a "complete rarity."[74]

Finally, there was also an institution that sometimes could counterweight the power of the Political Departments. This was the military unit party cell. Most Soviet officers were members or

candidate members of the Communist Party, and most large military units therefore had their own party cells. Some of the officers mixed their command with clerk duties for their unit's party cell, and there were some professional full-time party workers. Party cell meetings were supposed to give officers a chance to voice their opinions on controversial issues and even to criticize the conduct of particular individuals. Thus, here the zampolity sometimes met resistance.

SPETSNAZ ADVISERS

In addition to the spetsnaz brigade headquarters, battalions, and companies that fought as part of the 40th Army, there was also an independent SzGRU advisory mission in Afghanistan. This was the special operations wing of the larger Soviet military advisory mission. The latter traced its history back to the 1920s and stayed organizationally separate from the 40th Army. While 40th Army troops in general had limited contact with Afghan colleagues other than occasionally fighting alongside them, the officers of the military advisory mission were directly embedded with Afghan units. They advised locals on organization and training, and they sometimes fought the mujahideen together with them. As in the Soviet engagements in Angola and Ethiopia, such joint fighting was not supposed to happen but often did anyway.[75] General Kurochkin's axiom from Angola that "the adviser should always be by his student's side" felt equally relevant for many of the Soviet advisers in Afghanistan. At the beginning of the 1980s, this military advisory mission consisted of some 1,600–1,800 Soviet military professionals.[76] In addition to improving the performance of the Afghan armed forces, their job was also to coordinate the activities of the Afghan army with those of the 40th Army. Organizationally, the advisers reported to a separate department in the General Staff responsible for international military

cooperation. The advisers went to Afghanistan for a period of two to three years at a time.[77]

The SzGRU wing of advisers instructed the five commandos brigades of the Afghan elite infantry as well as the two Afghan SOF battalions. The commandos brigades had an authorized strength of 2,000 troops each, but they were seldom filled up more than 60 percent.[78] Not very SOF-like, they were set up with main battle tanks and different types of artillery. Thus, Spetsnaz GRU were not their only advisers. For example, of the roughly 20 Soviet advisers that worked on a daily basis with the 444th Commandos Brigade, seven were from spetsnaz. The rest came from Soviet artillery, communications, military engineering, and other types of units.[79] In addition to the commandos brigades, the Afghan army also had the 203rd and 212th Special Forces Battalions. These were, in the same way as their Soviet counterparts, subordinated to the intelligence section of the General Staff. Of the two, only the 203rd engaged in what may be considered special operations.[80] That unit had three Spetsnaz GRU officers embedded as advisers.

Spetsnaz GRU officer Aleksandr Chubarov fought both in Afghanistan and in the later civil war in Tajikistan. He was a military adviser to the commander of the 37th Commandos Brigade from July 1984 to September 1986. Chubarov does not recall his period as an easy one. Training and instruction in military field disciplines went relatively well, but he found command and control and military staff work hard to teach. Unless the Afghan officer in charge had his military education from the Soviet Union, differences in worldview and mentality would often seriously undermine understanding and trust between the Soviet military adviser and his Afghan counterpart. Chubarov estimates that, of the officers he worked with, only 5–7 percent had undergone such military training.[81] According to him, one problem was that the Afghan commanders would base their operational planning on the authorized number of troops in the

different subordinate units or on an aggregate of what lower-level officers had reported. In both cases, these numbers were normally very far from reality. The problem with the bottom-up reporting was that subordinate commanders carried personal responsibility for being understaffed. Thus, they would report a much higher number of troops than they actually possessed. The result was that when an operation finally got under way, the commander usually had at his disposal far fewer troops than he thought when he planned the operation.

There were also problems within the military advisory missions themselves. In November 1985, Colonel Vladimir Barsukov was appointed head military adviser to the 38th Afghan Commandos Brigade in Ghazni. The brigade was widely known for being in total disarray. Barsukov was sent there to clean up. One of the problems was a serious conflict between the spetsnaz advisers, on the one side, and the Soviet technical and political military advisers on the other. There were intrigues, fistfights, and even occasional exchanges of fire between the two camps. After bringing back some kind of order and investigating the case, Barsukov concluded that the main reason for the fighting had simply been idleness. The brigade was so poorly led by the Afghan commander that there was little possibility of constructively advising anyone in anything.[82] The advisers had simply given up on the Afghans and out of inactivity started fighting among themselves instead.

A further responsibility of the military advisers was coordination between Soviet forces and the Afghan army. Progress here, however, often stumbled on the issue of information-sharing. Since the 40th Army with good reason was afraid of leaks from the Afghan army to the mujahideen, they would often not inform the Afghans on the details of joint operations until the last minute. For the same reason, they would even on occasion ignore Afghan participation altogether. This behavior from the 40th put the military advisers in a squeeze. They had to explain this abrasive Soviet conduct to the Afghans. Not

only did the secrecy create bad feelings on the Afghan side toward the commanders of the 40th Army; it also undermined Afghans' confidence in their Soviet advisers. Why should Afghans listen to them when even their own compatriots did not trust them enough to provide them with the information they needed?[83]

The choice to keep the Soviet military advisory mission separate from the 40th Army may have been a case of institutional path dependency. This mission had lived a separate existence since the 1920s. Still, it is possible that it would have functioned better if it was more closely integrated with the other military efforts. The main downside seems to have been that the military advisers often became scapegoats when the Afghans got frustrated with the behavior of the 40th Army. However, an advantage was probably that the military advisers had the opportunity to specialize in what they were doing. This would have been more difficult if they also had had to take part in the fighting done by the 40th.

Despite all the problems discussed above, there is still reason to believe that the Afghan forces actually became significantly better at what they were doing because of the Soviet advisory efforts. For example, reflecting on the major mixed Soviet-Afghan offensive against Zawar in 1985, the Pakistani brigadier general and mujahideen coordinator Mohammad Yousaf argues that this operation provided "striking evidence" of how the Afghan forces had improved. They totally dominated the operation, and Yousaf is convinced that this would have been out of the question three years earlier.[84] How much of the credit for such progress belongs to the Soviet military advisory mission is difficult to say, but it is likely it deserves at least some recognition.

THE NEVER-ENDING PROBLEM OF INTELLIGENCE

The memoir literature leaves little doubt that one of the most important problems for the Soviet war effort in Afghanistan was the lack of reliable and actionable intelligence. There were several problems both with the quality of the intelligence and with its sharing. Sergei Kozlov argues that the three weakest sides of the Soviet warfare in Afghanistan were: (1) insufficient understanding of local history, culture, and traditions; (2) poor interoperability between the different Soviet branches and services; and (3) the insufficiency of trustworthy, accurate, and actionable intelligence.[85] In terms of intelligence, Kozlov thinks the Soviets were no better in Afghanistan than they had been at the outbreak of World War II. The whole memoir literature is one big blame-game regarding the field of intelligence.

The KGB ran its intelligence operations in Afghanistan largely separate from the military. First, the Rezidentura (a permanent intelligence-gathering unit in a foreign country, called a "station" in English) subordinated to the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, gathered political and strategic intelligence in the way that this service would do in any foreign country. Second, on a lower operational level, SzKGB established agency networks among Afghan civilians and the mujahideen. Finally, Soviet border troops (subordinated to the KGB) ran operations, including intelligence operations, into northern Afghanistan. Their units probably compare to the tactical intelligence units of the 40th Army that were active in the rest of Afghanistan.

On the military side, the GRU created its own Intelligence Center, which established agent networks among the Afghans similar to what Spetsnaz KGB did. Rodric Braithwaite argues that "it was not unknown for rival agencies on the Russian side—KGB and GRU—to employ the same agent unwittingly, paying him twice for the same piece of dubious information."[86] The GRU Intelligence Center set up so-called Operativno-Agenturnye Gruppy (OAGs) in most places in Afghanistan where 40th Army units were located. The OAGs were to serve the intelligence needs not just of spetsnaz but also of the entire

40th Army. The personnel came not from spetsnaz but from the agentura part of GRU. That meant the operators had little in common with spetsnaz even though they both belonged to the same agency. Agentura and spetsnaz were and continue to be separate careers within the GRU. The size of each OAG would depend on local conditions. Four or five people in the smallest groups and eight to ten in the largest. In addition to the OAGs, the SzGRU battalions ran their own intelligence operations in support of their own operations. General Gromov, in his memoir, concedes that Spetsnaz GRU for the most part was forced to rely on the intelligence it was able to muster on its own.[87] Finally, as it would have done in any war, the 40th Army ran its own regular tactical intelligence units.

In addition, the military advisory mission was also supposed to provide intelligence. Advisers were expected to learn a lot through their intimate contacts with Afghan forces. Lastly, Afghan military intelligence, the Afghan security service KhAD, and the Afghan police (Tsarandoy) were expected to share intelligence with their Soviet partners. Thus, there was absolutely no scarcity of agencies and personnel engaged in the gathering of intelligence. Nevertheless, few other areas of the struggle have such a bad reputation.

Most spetsnaz memoirs leave little praise for the intelligence they received from their agentura GRU colleagues in the OAGs. Overall, Sergei Kozlov thinks the OAGs with a few exceptions provided little trustworthy and actionable intelligence for spetsnaz.[88] The officers of these groups all had the wrong training. At the Military-Diplomatic Academy, they had been prepared for running agent networks in peacetime, often in politically stable Western capitalist countries. This setting was completely different from Afghanistan. For example, recruitment techniques often presupposed processes that took years. In Afghanistan, there was no time for that. GRU Colonel Zakirzhon Kadyrov was head of the Kabul OAG from 1987 until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. He remembers that the proposal to become an

agent usually had to come up no later than at the third meeting with a potential candidate. This meant that all the methods GRU officers had learned for making sure that a recruit was genuine and trustworthy had limited applicability.

Unsurprising, many spetsnaz commanders did not have a lot of trust in the OAGs. Major Evgenii Sergeev is one example. He was second in command of the 186th SzGRU Battalion in Shah Joi in the southern Zabol Province. A Byelorussian from Polotsk, he is one of the spetsnaz most critical of the OAGs' utility in Afghanistan. Sergeev is still something of a legend in Spetsnaz GRU. He is seen as one of the most innovative of the spetsnaz commanders in the Afghan war, and he is widely credited for being the first to capture a US-made Stinger Man-Portable Air-Defense System. Sergeev, in his memoirs, complains that, "although we in spetsnaz and the OAGs were supposed to work in tandem, only the spetsnaz part of this tandem was of any use."[89] He remembers that, sometime after arriving in Shah Joi, he actually prohibited his own men from sharing information they had gathered with the local OAG. The reason was that the latter would immediately pass it on along the chain of command and take the credit themselves. The neighboring 173rd SzGRU Battalion in Kandahar had warned him of this practice.[90]

Moreover, Sergeev often suspected that the OAGs, to demonstrate their efficiency to higher authorities, would simply make things up. Such fraud would not be revealed if they presented the intelligence in a way and at a time where spetsnaz or other forces had no possibility of reacting to it operationally. Once, anticipating what he suspected was another OAG intelligence fake, Sergeev decided to call their bluff. The local OAG had informed him that a 17-lorry mujahideen caravan would soon come through Meltanai Valley. Sergeev immediately sent a team there. The men sat for eight days observing without seeing a single lorry. He then called them home. However, unbeknownst to the OAG, he immediately sent a second team to the very same place. When the

head of intelligence for the Turkestan Military District visited the battalion a few days later, the head of the OAG group informed the prominent guest that a 17-lorry caravan had passed through Meltanai the previous night. Unfortunately, he said, the spetsnaz forces had ignored his intelligence and prematurely pulled out their team. They therefore missed the caravan. Sergeev greatly enjoyed the pale face of the OAG commander when the latter learned about the second spetsnaz observation team and understood that Sergeev had called him out on his lie in front of the important commander.

Furthermore, army tactical intelligence also had their quarrels with the OAGs. During 1983–1984, Colonel Nikolai Kuzmin was head of intelligence in the 201st Motorized Infantry Division in Kunduz. He found the local OAG intelligence wanting—mostly, he guessed, because many of the OAG agents among the mujahideen worked both sides at the same time.[91] Furthermore, even if OAG intelligence turned out to be good, it was usually two to three days late. By the time it reached the forces, it was of little use. He also felt that the OAGs were highly unwilling to take any responsibility for the utility of the intelligence they presented. "They showed no interest whatsoever in how we were supposed to act on this or that piece of information."[92]

Unsurprisingly, things looked rather different from the OAGs' own point of view. GRU Colonel Zakirzhon Kadyrov readily admits that the trustworthiness of their intelligence often was questionable. The reasons were several. There was a mismatch between what they had learned at the Military-Diplomatic Academy and the Afghan realities. Their practice as military spies at Soviet embassies was of little use in the Afghan mountains, and there were no previous networks of agents to build on. On top of this, the OAGs were required to produce actionable intelligence almost from the moment they hit the ground. The war was going full speed, and the troops expected vital intelligence yesterday, so to speak. Thus, normal

procedures for vetting sources was largely out of the question. This was especially true at the beginning of the conflict. Kadyrov felt that the rest of the 40th Army had absolutely no understanding for how long it took to establish a network of *trustworthy* informants.

Kadyrov also argues that the OAGs often became convenient scapegoats for the army's operational fiascos. If operations failed, it was very easy to blame insufficient or faulty intelligence. For example, rocket attacks from mujahideen units in the countryside just outside the city was a particular concern in Kabul. Kadyrov remembers that he made sure to pass on any intelligence about possible attacks to the 40th Army staff as soon as possible. In the haste to do that, however, there was not always time to produce a full written report. The information was mostly handed over orally. In that case, however, if the army failed to prevent an attack and there was no written report in advance, they would deny having received any intelligence at all. Thus, they could blame the failure on the OAG. According to Kadyrov, if the OAG could not document that a written intelligence warning had been provided for the army's top brass, the latter "would with pleasure shift all responsibility for what happened onto the Intelligence Center."[93] Thus, the OAG need to avoid blame gradually came at the cost of the speedy delivery of intelligence.

As time went on, however, the OAGs learned and improved their work. Kadyrov remembers that in the early 1980s recruiting anyone who had a connection with one of the mujahideen groups was a coup. Later, the intelligence officers would limit their recruitment only to people in senior positions or individuals close to them. However, the opponent also improved. For example, in the beginning of the war the mujahideen would just summarily execute those who had been identified as working with the Soviets. Later, when the CIA and other intelligence services became more involved in mujahideen training, many of those who were unveiled as Soviet agents would instead be turned into double agents.[94]

In relation to the military, the KGB was political top dog in Afghanistan in the same way that it was back home. This did not mean that the KGB could control how the military operated, but it did mean they were likely to come out the winner in most institutional disputes where Moscow was involved. They were officially charged with maintaining political control over the military, and they were usually one step closer to the leadership in the Kremlin, which gave them great advantage in institutional conflicts. They would often have the last word on whether or not to remove commanders from duty. This privilege included military commanders. For example, in December 1979 the KGB convinced the Kremlin to call back General Vasilii Zaplatin from Afghanistan. In their view, he did not fully understand the political situation in the country.[95] This meant that crossing the institutional interests and positions of the KGB could have serious personal consequences for the careers of individual military officers.

The intelligence cooperation between the military and the KGB was even more troubled than the intramilitary squabbles. The memoirs suggest that neither side was happy with the other. Boris Gromov remembers that "we were always careful with the intelligence we got from the KGB."[96] The 40th Army leadership often thought the KGB-gathered intelligence was of little interest for military operations, and they believed the agency sometimes exploited its intelligence to manipulate Moscow. One consequence of this was that Moscow next ordered the military to conduct operations that made little sense. Gromov also accuses many KGB operators of being more concerned with their own careers than with the fighting on the ground. He argues they would frequently promote themselves by twisting information in a way they expected would confirm the already existing worldviews of their superiors in Moscow. Many times, this reporting took place without the knowledge of the staff of the 40th Army. The result was that Moscow yelled at the 40th for not keeping track of events. Moscow came to see the situation in Afghanistan mostly

through KGB eyes and could therefore not understand why the leadership of the 40th Army acted the way it did.[97]

Gromov seems particularly angry with the KGB for sabotaging the 1983 temporary peace agreement that the military had negotiated with the Tajik warlord Akhmed Shah Masood. The breakthrough had come after three years of secret negotiations.[98] According to Gromov, the negotiations were a military initiative that the KGB only knew about. The reason he is so bitter is that, even though the KGB knew how important the truce was for the military, they still in the end convinced Moscow to end it. Gromov argues that the KGB manipulated Moscow into presenting the warlord with new ultimatums that they knew he could not accept. Thus, according to him, the breakdown of the peace accord happened because KGB "cabinet generals in Moscow wanted more medals attached to their uniform," and "for this they were willing to put even more 40th Army officers' and soldiers' lives at risk." Gromov concludes that "the Chekisty [i.e., KGB operatives] damaged their reputation in Afghanistan."[99]

Since the KGB did not expect to rely on intelligence produced by the military, KGB memoirs are not in the same way filled with criticism of the armed forces. It is of course likely that the KGB as an organization knew of the existence of attitudes such as the ones demonstrated by Gromov, but Valentin Iutov in his memoirs still insists that "the military commanders saw Kaskad [i.e., the name of the SzKGB units in Afghanistan from 1980 to 1984] as their brothers in arms." He goes on to say: "Kaskad in time provided the military with a lot of accurate and trustworthy intelligence on the whereabouts of the bandit formations [i.e., mujahideen]."[100] Based on the military memoir literature, there is little doubt that Iutov paints a rosy picture of the KGB—military relationship, but that does not mean there was no successful cooperation between the agencies.

In one example, from the southern province of Kandahar, the commander of the 173rd SzGRU Battalion, Captain Sergei Bokhan, developed close cooperation with KGB Lieutenant Colonel Evegenii Balov. Balov was working locally as an adviser to the Afghan security service KhAD. Bokhan found the local military OAG of little use, but he would meet regularly with Balov to get information. Balov would even on occasion gather intelligence on commission from Bokhan.[101] It seems unlikely that the Bokhan–Balov tandem was the only example of successful military–KGB intelligence cooperation. In fact, according to Marco Vorobiev, a spetsnaz conscript who fought in Afghanistan, his unit sometimes had direct contact with the KhAD's informant networks.[102] Such contacts were probably established with the assistance of the KGB as demonstrated in the Bokhan and Balov example. Thus, even if there were major problems on the institutional level on intelligence cooperation, the current examples suggest that this at least occasionally could be mitigated by personal relationships of trust between individual officers on the ground.

Even if intelligence is the aspect of the warfare in Afghanistan where the different agencies have the most grievances against each other, they all still agree on one thing: their Afghan partners were worse. For example, Zakirzhon Kadyrov recalls that both the GRU Intelligence Center and the OAGs minimized cooperation with Afghan intelligence.[103] They did not trust them. Similarly, the KGB always had to be careful with the information they got from the Fifth (Antibanditism) Directorate of the KhAD. This directorate's main weakness according to Soviet sources was their poor counterintelligence. SzGRU commanders would regularly complain that the enemy seemed to know beforehand almost all operations spetsnaz planned in cooperation with Afghan partners. To give one example, the KGB after a very long time discovered that one of their highest-ranking contacts in the Fifth Directorate was in fact working for Masood.[104]

A solid relationship of trust never developed between the Soviet military and their Afghan counterparts. As Boris Gromov bluntly admits, "in all of the Afghan army forces there were very few who had any sympathy for the Soviets."[105] Likewise, Rodric Braithwaite concludes in his study of the Soviet warfare in Afghanistan that "most of the Soviet soldiers despised their Afghan allies[] and wondered why they fought so badly when the same Afghans fought so well with the mujahedin."[106]

HUNTING FROM THE AIR—THE SPETSNAZ HELICOPTER ADVANTAGE

The greatest military lead the Soviets had over the mujahideen was air power, especially helicopters.[107] These supplied spetsnaz with most of the speed, mobility, and firepower they needed to execute their operations. Furthermore, a good deal of the intelligence spetsnaz needed for operations came from helicopter reconnaissance flights. In terms of close air support, spetsnaz also got some help from ground attack fighter aircraft. These, however, did usually not develop the kind of direct relationships that matured between spetsnaz and the helicopter pilots. Still, the Su-25 fighter planes of the 3rd Air Squadron at Kandahar did get a special responsibility for supporting spetsnaz on caravan-hunting missions.[108] Furthermore, the Soviet Union never developed an equivalent to the US fixed-wing gunships for SOF close air support. These aircraft, essentially just military transport planes with a lot of antiground weapons fastened to them, have been prized assets of US SOF since the Vietnam War. If copied by the Soviets, they could probably have increased spetsnaz combat efficiency in terms of armed reconnaissance and urban combat in addition to firepower.[109]

However, in the Afghan war, helicopters made the real difference. In the summer of 1986, analysts at Langley (CIA HQ) and in Pakistan

feared that the combination of spetsnaz and helicopters was about to tip the war in the Soviets' favor.[110] Pro-mujahideen US policymakers went as far as arguing that the Afghan fighters might abandon the struggle unless they got US Stinger surface-to-air missiles to combat the spetsnaz–helicopter menace. Pakistani Brigadier General Mohammad Yousaf finds this claim overstated, but he also confirms that, without Stingers to fight Mi-8s and Mi-24s, "mujahideen morale would not hold out indefinitely."[111]

Despite this success, the use of helicopters in support of spetsnaz got off to a rocky start and was troubled throughout the conflict. Spetsnaz training with helicopters had been mostly experimental and haphazard before the war. One reason for this was that Soviet military leaders tended to see the helicopter first as an antitank weapon. Hunting tanks in high-intensity combat on the German plains was the dominant element in the training of most Soviet helicopter pilots. True, since 1968 helicopter pilots had also trained on the insertion behind enemy lines of the newly created and army-subordinated airmobile storm troops. These units were in essence small VDV elements belonging to the army. The main difference was that they travelled in helicopters instead of in airplanes. In fact, these troops later became part of the VDV. The helicopter training with these units had included the used of Mi-24s in a fire-support role similar to what they would do for spetsnaz in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the existence of these units did not really help spetsnaz in Afghanistan. The setting for the training had been large-scale maneuver warfare against a peer enemy, not counterinsurgency, and none of the training took place at high altitudes. Moreover, nobody made systematic efforts to make sure that the pilots who had gone through such training were the same ones who would work for spetsnaz in Afghanistan.

Kozlov recollects that, after a long quarrel with a helicopter pilot over how and where to fly, the pilot exhaustedly told him: "Listen to me lieutenant, if you continue to argue I will not fly you anywhere. I

can show you so many instructions prohibiting me from flying the way you want that I can keep my helicopter on the ground for a year without anybody being able to say anything."[112] It is important to keep in mind here that, until Operation Zavesa, support for spetsnaz did not constitute a very large portion of total helicopter missions. In 1985, when the Zavesa plan had barely started, such assignments constituted only about 25 percent of all helicopter missions. The rest were for logistical tasks (44 percent), fire support for the regular army troops (27 percent), and reconnaissance and fire support for Soviet military convoys (7 percent).[113]

All this meant that few spetsnaz had much experience with helicopters. Furthermore, most helicopter pilots, according to one of them, because of the secrecy, never even knew that such a thing as spetsnaz existed until they met them in Afghanistan.[114] Additionally, as we saw in the case of Lieutenant Borisov, there were no technical solutions for spetsnaz on the ground to communicate directly with the helicopter pilots. All three elements made interaction difficult.

Once the war started, however, the usefulness of helicopters for spetsnaz was obvious to everyone. As we have seen, already in March 1980 the 40th Army leadership ordered the 459th Spetsnaz Company in Kabul to start reconnaissance with the help of helicopters. These missions were relatively uncomplicated. The problems started to show only when the helicopters had to support spetsnaz ground combat missions. These problems concerned pilot skills, technical characteristics of the helicopters, and the military-bureaucratic procedures for their use.

In addition to the fact that most Soviet helicopter pilots had not exercised with spetsnaz, their training had also been overly risk-averse. According to a helicopter pilot with the surname Illarioshin, Soviet rotary-wing aviators almost never trained on flying close to the ground. Their instructions during exercises had most often been to "race the helicopter up to between 900 and 1200 meters and stay

there."[115] The main reason for this restriction was that many commanders were afraid of having helicopters crash on their watch. For the same reason, they would also avoid pilots testing how the helicopters behaved during maximal banking to one side or when going full speed. While there is little evidence of the Soviet or Russian militaries being more careful than others during actual combat, risk avoidance during exercises is a problem recognized in the Russian armed forces even today.[116] Excessive personal responsibility in cases of material loss during exercises predictably leads to overly cautious behavior. In Afghanistan, acrimony between spetsnaz and helicopter pilots over risk aversion came to a peak when one pilot, claiming disproportionate hazard, refused to land to evacuate a number of dead and wounded spetsnaz on a mission in early 1985. When the Mi-8 instead departed, the mujahideen tortured the wounded and disgraced the bodies of the dead. Upon returning to base, the helicopter crew had to be transferred to a different garrison to avoid reprisals from the infuriated comrades of those who had suffered.[117]

One result of pilot unpreparedness, especially at the beginning of the war, was repeated episodes of blue-on-blue fire. Kozlov claims that spetsnaz fears of such episodes even led to an underutilization of the Mi-24 gunships in the early phases of the war. Many spetsnaz in this period tried to do without "Stalin's falcons," as they called them. They were afraid of themselves becoming targets.[118]

Illarioshin recalls that he and other helicopter pilots repeatedly asked superiors for permission to train with spetsnaz after the problems in Afghanistan had become obvious. This, however, turned out to be an "unsurpassable obstacle."[119] Ironically, many helicopter pilots in the navy had actually trained for types of flying similar to what was needed in Afghanistan when they exercised with Naval Infantry. Thus, the Soviet Union did in fact possess some pilots with relevant training. The problem was that these belonged to the navy.

The war in Afghanistan was no business for that branch, and the navy pilots were not deployed.

Like most of the rest of Soviet army and air force equipment, neither the Mi-8s nor the relatively new and untested Mi-24s were designed for battle at high altitudes. The big war with NATO would take place on the European plains. Both types of rotary aircraft became difficult to maneuver in thin air and high temperatures. These were the conditions one would find present much of the time in the Afghan mountains. True, the Mi-8 did somewhat better than the Mi-24. Again ironically, the other Soviet helicopter manufacturer, Kamov, had designed an aircraft that potentially could have handled the Afghan conditions better. This was the naval Ka-29. That helicopter was more capable at flying in high temperatures than the Mi-24, and it had better armor and more firepower.[120] It is not clear exactly why the Ka-29 remained unused in Afghanistan, other than it was designed specifically for naval and not land warfare. One possible explanation is the well-known rivalry between the Mil and Kamov helicopter producers.[121] It cannot be excluded that Mil had lobbied to prevent the use of the Ka-29 in Afghanistan to prevent Kamov from making inroads into the domestic market for nonnaval helicopters.

The bureaucratic problems hampering spetsnaz use of helicopters in Afghanistan originated from the fact that the helicopters were part of the air force and not the army. Air force commanders would therefore throughout the war veto many missions for which spetsnaz asked for helicopters. The problems were again most pressing at the beginning of the war, but they never entirely went away. Still, some improvements did take place. In some cases, individual spetsnaz and helicopter detachment commanders on their own started to make local arrangements. As an example, the 50th Helicopter Detachment in Kabul, which supported the 459th Kabul Company, decided themselves to specialize a certain number of their pilots for spetsnaz assignments. As far as they could, they would keep these pilots away

from other types of missions. The chosen would specialize on becoming as good as possible in handling the challenges particular to spetsnaz missions.[122] Additionally, the military leadership in connection with Zavesa assigned dedicated helicopter squadrons to each Spetsnaz brigade headquarters. In terms of the latter, the 239th Helicopter Detachment in Ghazni was dedicated to the needs of the 15th Spetsnaz Brigade, and the 205th Detachment in Lashkargakh was dedicated to the 22nd. This late-1985 decision was a very clear recognition of the importance of spetsnaz to the entire operation. Each detachment counted 16 Mi-8s and 16 Mi-24s. The new Mi-8s and the Mi-24s had significantly enhanced armor, flare dispenser units to defend against MANPADs, engines improved for high-altitude flying, and new weapons to boost firepower. In terms of the latter, the new Mi-24s were equipped with the same 30mm cannons that the Su-25 fighters used. This cannon became the favorite weapon of Mi-24 crews for the rest of the war. In addition to these technical improvements, crews underwent one-month of high-altitude mountain training in the Soviet Union before deployment. Probably most important, however, the detachment commanders were granted previously unheard-of latitude in deciding upon and implementing operations directly with spetsnaz battalion commanders.[123] There is little doubt that these measures improved cooperation between helicopter crews and spetsnaz.

But problems remained. First, there was an acute shortage of helicopter pilots. To fill up the crews for the new detachments, the air force sometimes had to resort to recruiting pilots straight out of civilian helicopter training. Some of these had never seen a military helicopter until they stood on the tarmac in Afghanistan. The problem was mitigated by mixing newcomers with experienced pilots. Many of the latter had just finished their tours but were then denied leave. These emergency measures helped, but the high level of inexperience

still took its toll. The 205th Detachment lost 12 helicopters during its first 15 months of operation.[124]

Additionally, the helicopter detachments suffered from the same problem that most Soviet forces in Afghanistan did. The top brass back in Moscow refused to accept that adapting to the ongoing war in Afghanistan in any way should come at the cost of preparing for war with NATO. This meant that the types of operations that took place in Afghanistan had little impact on the training that took place in the Soviet Union. Thus, despite some additional training in high-altitude flying, the new troops that arrived continued to be trained for a completely different kind of war. The leaderships of the 40th Army and the Turkestan Military District dispatched recommendations back to Moscow for how new arrivals in Afghanistan could be better prepared. The General Staff, however, dismissed the recommendations contained in these suggestions as "too untypical" to be included in the training curriculum. It is interesting to note that the air force held its first conference on lessons learned from Afghanistan only in 1986.[125] That was six years after the fighting started and only two years before most of the fighting ended in 1988.

Helicopters were fundamental to spetsnaz efficiency throughout the war. Still, they would undoubtedly have been even more important if predeployment training had been more relevant and risk-acceptant, independent helicopter attachments had been dedicated to spetsnaz brigades earlier, and the military leadership had taken a more pragmatic view toward which helicopters were best-suited independent of whether they were originally designed for the navy or the army.

SPETSNAZ KGB AND IDEAS ABOUT A POPULATION-CENTRIC APPROACH

Although being a decisive element in the initial Shtorm-333 operation again Amin's palace, Spetsnaz KGB returned to Afghanistan later than did Spetsnaz GRU. The trigger may have been the popular revolts in Kandahar and Herat in the summer of 1980. After these events, the Soviet Ministry of Defense and the KGB set down a joint working group to hammer out a strategy to deal with the new developments. Initially, Soviet leader Iuri Andropov had planned to send only a small group of 77 Spetsnaz KGB. However, when the first Kaskad, as the unit was called, entered Afghanistan in the summer of 1980, it counted close to a thousand operators. After their arrival, Kaskad split into eight similar-size units that deployed to different regions of the country. They concentrated, as did the military, on the area around Kabul, along Salang Highway, and in the eastern and southern regions that bordered Pakistan and Iran. The first Kaskad consisted exclusively of officers, including several who had participated in the Zenith unit during the storming of Amin's palace. Colonel Vladimir Vener remembers there was always a big deficit of people who knew local languages and/or had any experience with the local culture. They also had far too few who had any experience with "the establishment of agent networks."[126] The average age of these "Kaskadery" was 30 years, and they had a very varied background. Most of them came from other branches of the KGB, such as counterintelligence and foreign espionage.

Many, at least in the first Kaskad contingent, had undertaken only KUOS training. A few came from Alpha, and from the autumn of 1982 service in a Kaskad unit in Afghanistan became compulsory for Alpha operators. They would serve in periods of two months until the beginning of 1987.[127] The KGB leadership most likely saw the Afghan war as an excellent opportunity for Alpha to gain combat experience. This was true even if they did things in Afghanistan that differed significantly from what they trained for at home. Those with KUOS training usually served six months.

Furthermore, KGB officers with KUOS training were in short supply. Thus, consecutive Kaskad contingents would be complemented with conscripts from the KGB border guards. For example, in Kaskad-3, which served in Afghanistan from July 1981 to March 1982, the different regional detachments would typically consist of 50–60 privates from the border guards in noncombat roles and 20 KUOS-trained officers in addition to a small number of warrant officers and interpreters.[128]

The head of KGB foreign intelligence, General Kriuchkov, instructed Spetsnaz KGB before their departure that they would basically be doing three things: (1) help the Afghans create security agency cells in the localities; (2) organize a network of informers inside the different insurgent groups; and (3) conduct special operations against the most aggressive enemies of the Kabul government.[129] The first task obviously did not overlap with what Spetsnaz GRU were doing, and neither did the second very much. The third, however, was clearly close. From April 1981 to March 1982, for example, Kaskad was involved in 21 major combat operations together with Afghan operatives.[130] They were, however, forbidden to take part in operations conducted by the Soviet military.[131]

There is also another distinction between the operations of Spetsnaz GRU and Spetsnaz KGB. It illustrates the broader room for maneuver in the political domain enjoyed by the KGB. Both types of spetsnaz would fight mujahideen directly, but only the KGB would try to turn mujahideen commanders and their organizations from enemies to allies. For example, in early 1981 the Kaskad unit in Herat convinced the Tajik mujahideen leader Hodzha Shir-Aga Chungara to switch sides. Chungara had a following of about 250 fighters. Over the coming year, he took part in a large number of operations against his former mujahideen allies. It seems that money rather than political conviction was the main reason for his defection. In 1982, a similar arrangement was made with the commanders Dir Oraz Heldy in Jowzhan Province

and Ulusvaki Karabach in Kabul Province. Kaskad again turned them both with money.[132] In a third example, KGB Colonel Petr Suslov, a staff officer in Kaskad-4, tells the story of how a number of Soviet engineers had been taken hostage by the mujahideen in northern Afghanistan. In this situation, Kaskad was able to make a deal with a local Ismaili commander in Masar-i-Sharif. The latter would use his forces to limit the areas where the hostage takers could move sufficiently for Kaskad to find them. Some of the hostages were rescued, but some also died in the operation. Kaskad had over time entertained a good relationship with the Ismailis, sometimes providing them with arms.[133]

One explanation for the deployment of Spetsnaz KGB units in addition to SzGRU seems to have been that Andropov did not consider the military very capable of conducting a counterinsurgency. He argued that the armed forces were best suited for direct battles against clearly identified enemies.[134] In the case of an insurgency, by contrast, there was a need for the KGB. This thinking had historical precedence. The security service and not the army had been in charge of crushing domestic Soviet insurgencies. Former Vympel operator Valentin Iutov is clear about how he saw the shortcomings of the regular military in terms of counterinsurgency: "It is a matter of fact that the army fights in its own peculiar way. In general, it is unable to convert to counterinsurgency methods. This is not their fault, they are simply meant for other purposes. Only their special forces have some flexibility in this respect, and even this is rather limited."[135] Iutov compares SzKGB rather than SzGRU with the US Green Berets.[136] Another former Vympel operator, Vladimir Surodin, claims that the KGB training center at Balashikha outside Moscow was the only place in the Soviet Union where the theory of counterinsurgency was taught with a military-scientific foundation.[137] Still, both SzKGB and SzGRU conducted similar missions in Afghanistan. One difference was that Spetsnaz KGB did not use conscripts other than in rear service

functions such as cooks, guards, and drivers. For this reason, Spetsnaz KGB operators were often older and more experienced than their army counterparts were. The Komitetchiki also tended to operate closer to base than did many of the Spetsnaz GRU units.

The existence of a KGB counterinsurgency historical legacy, however, did not mean that such competence permeated the organization at the time of the invasion of Afghanistan. It had been well over 20 years since the last Ukrainian nationalists and Baltic Forest Brothers were beaten, and the KGB's dedicated counterinsurgency units were closed down in the early to mid-1950s. True, some such experience may have survived in the less purge-afflicted Soviet border guards. These troops had been subordinated to the security service since the early 1920s, and together with the much more numerous and military-like troops of the security service (at that time: the Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD), they had participated in the battle against Ukrainian and Baltic insurgents.[138] In Afghanistan, however, the border guards largely ran their separate KGB-led anti-mujahideen operations in the north of the country away from the heaviest fighting. They were active to a depth of at most 100–150 kilometers into Afghan territory more or less along the whole 2,000-kilometer Soviet–Afghan border.[139] Because of those operations, the 40th Army was less engaged in these areas.

However, war with NATO now dominated KGB's daily thinking and planning. In a rather famous episode from 1980, KGB General V. Kirsanov declined a proposal from his commander to head the establishment of a SzKGB unit for service in Afghanistan. Such a refusal was highly uncommon in the hierarchical Soviet system. The commander was the then head of the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, General Vladimir Kriuchkov. Kirsanov's justification was that he felt he had no competence in military matters or the conduct of special operations.[140] Kriuchkov and many others in the KGB at the time interpreted Kirsanov's rejection as cowardice. Vladimir Surodin,

however, argues that Kirsanov's refusal was a courageous act. He was not willing to take on a task for which he knew he was unqualified just to please his superior.[141] Surodin thinks many of the senior KGB commanders in Afghanistan, despite the agency's proclaimed expertise, had little idea about the details of counterinsurgency warfare and that this fact had a negative effect on the Soviet war effort.[142]

The KGB leadership recognized that units lacked sufficient military training. Because of this, most Spetsnaz KGB units underwent additional soldier training with the 105th Airborne Division in Fergana in Uzbekistan before deployment to Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Kaskad units were at least formally part of the Soviet military effort.[143] The military therefore called them "Andropov's battalions." This official inclusion, however, did not give the military any command over these units. Iutov clearly states that their only subordination in terms of command was to KGB headquarters back in Moscow and to the head KGB representative in Kabul.[144] In fact, the formal relationship with the 40th Army may mostly have been a way for the KGB leadership to ensure their units access to military resources such as armored vehicles and helicopters that they did not possess themselves.

In a separate development, a special unit from the Soviet Ministry of the Interior (Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del—MVD) designated "Kobalt" had also been sent to Afghanistan. This unit counted 600 operators. It would support the development of Afghan police in addition to helping the Afghan security service hunt down individual mujahideen leaders.[145] The MVD, however, had no experience in running operations abroad, and Kobalt arrived in Afghanistan with no institutional connection to the rest of the Soviet effort. Moreover, they had no actual reach-back organization in Moscow. The MVD therefore pleaded with Kaskad commander Aleksandr Lazarenko to take Kobalt under his wings, but he refused. Lazarenko found his spectrum of responsibilities wide enough as it was. Still, the MVD

continued lobbying in Moscow. In the end, Lazarenko received a letter telling him that in addition to all the other tasks he was now also responsible for the establishment of local police stations across the country.[146] One effect of this subordination was that Kaskad and Kobalt more and more came to see each other's tasks as joint. In practice, they conducted most operations together.[147]

All this suggests that, rather than the KGB and the Soviet military engaging in a joint and coordinated mission in Afghanistan, they fought the same war mostly in parallel. Sometimes they cooperated and sometimes they quarreled, but any structural unity of effort never emerged. True, coordination improved after leadership meetings among the Soviet ambassador, the main KGB representative, the head of 40th Army, the main military adviser, and the head of Kaskad had become a daily occurrence.

There were four different Kaskad contingents of similar size in Afghanistan from July 1980 to April 1983. After that, the SzKGB element changed names to "Omega." This new unit served only in one contingent. When Omega left Afghanistan in April 1984, this was the end of SzKGB units in the Afghan war. However, operators from the newly established Vympel would continue to work as advisers to the Afghan security service until the end of 1986.[148]

In Omega, fighting mujahideen was reduced to help the Afghan security service get effective.[149] There are two not necessarily competing explanations for this change of focus for Spetsnaz KGB. First, some see the reduced exposure to direct fighting as a reaction to higher than expected losses in the Kaskad contingents. Erkebek Abdualaev, an ethnic Kirgiz who fought in Omega's Kabul attachment, remembers that his men initially were furious at their commander for denying them combat to keep them out of harm's way.[150]

A former Omega officer, Oleg Savitskii, has proposed a second reason. He argues that the commander of Omega, Valentin Iutov, and his new ideas for how to fight an insurgency were a major reason for

the change of tactics. In essence, Savitskii's argument is that Iutov was the first to try to take the KGB counterinsurgency legacy seriously. Before Omega's departure to Afghanistan in 1983, Iutov organized a major KGB conference on what lessons the organization should draw from its historical experience with this type of warfare. In particular, the fight against the Central Asian Basmachi movement (1916–1934) was studied and discussed in detail. Iutov thought it would be stupid not to exploit the fact that the KBG had previously fought a similar war with these forces. In preparation for this conference, all Omega subunit commanders studied different periods and episodes of this historical legacy. At the event itself, they presented how lessons from their particular historical topic should influence their own missions in Afghanistan. Two years earlier, when Andropov established Vympel, this new unit had its own small analytical division. It was now this division, based on the results of the conference and on their own work, that started to produce many of the recommendations for how Omega would differ from Kaskad. Interestingly, in terms of the Soviet and later Western counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan, this may have been the first evidence-based recommendation for a population-centric as opposed to an enemy-centric approach. Oleg Savitskii, who worked in this analytical division, insists, "in our recommendations we persistently spread the idea that . . . the winner in this war will be the party that gets the population on its side."[151]

Most accounts of the Soviet counterinsurgency in Afghanistan argue that the warfare was overwhelmingly enemy-centric.[152] Some authors, however, have more recently started to challenge that assessment.[153] They argue that Soviet hearts-and-minds operations did take place and that these efforts even increased toward the end of the war. However, they also admit that these population-centric approaches were often small-scale, uncoordinated, and, most important, detached from the military operations. Paul Robinson argues that, even if the idea of appealing to the population, as with

Omega, gained ground, to the Soviets "it appears that for them combat was one thing, and hearts and minds another."[154]

Thus, even with this modified view of the Soviet warfare taken into account, it is difficult to argue that the population-centric ideas of Vympel's analytical division gained a lot of traction. They came too late, and they failed to convince enough of the officers within the organization. In fact, the idea met significant internal resistance. For example, the head of Omega's Kabul detachment, Colonel Anatolii Zamorev, insisted that the liquidation of mujahideen leaders was more or less the only thing that would have any effect. His mantra was "if there is no commander there is not unity." He would often agree with the new ideas of the analytical division in principle, but in practice he would mostly send his men out on headhunting missions.[155]

WAS IT WORTH IT?

On 8 February 1988, the Soviet Politburo announced that permanent withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan would start on 15 May that same year. For spetsnaz, it was decided that four of the eight battalions would leave already the same month. The last two would remain until February 1989. The latter would be involved in combat more or less until the day they crossed the Soviet–Afghan border. The 177th left the country on 15 February 1989—the last day of the war. Six days earlier, when the 177th was still securing the retreat of the rest of the army near the village of Doshi in the Salang Pass, SzGRU Lieutenant Oleg Matakov was seriously injured. He died in hospital in the Soviet Union the same day as his colleague, Aleksei Sergachev, crossed the border sitting on top of the last Soviet BTR to leave. The vehicle was driving a couple of meters behind General Gromov, who crossed the last 70 meters of the Afghan-Soviet Friendship Bridge over the Amu Darya River on foot. When Gromov neared the other side,

he was curious to see if anybody from the Kremlin had found the time to travel to Termez. It would not have been unnatural for somebody in high office to welcome home the last of the soldiers to return from a 10-year-long war. In Moscow, however, Afghanistan had already become an embarrassment. As Gromov neared the end of the bridge, he could see there were no political dignitaries there. He bitterly thought to himself that "this deliberate disregard for the 40th Army and its return from Afghanistan is just one more example of the insensitivity of those now in the Kremlin."[156]

From 1979 to 1989, as many as 45,000 troops may have served in SzGRU detachments in the war in Afghanistan.[157] At the peak of operations in the mid-1980s, there were about 4,000 in the country at any one time.[158] This accounted for 3.2 percent of the roughly 120,000 Soviet troops stationed there.[159] If one adds to spetsnaz the Airborne troops and the reconnaissance units from the regular army, the troops that most often fought alongside Spetsnaz GRU, together they constituted about 20 percent of the force.[160] In addition, there were the SzKBG units of Kaskad (later Omega) and the MVD's Kobalt, totaling from 1,000 to 1,600.

Makhmud Gareev, former chief military adviser to the president of Afghanistan and later military historian, has calculated that Spetsnaz GRU conducted 416 planned operations during the war.[161] These do not include the daily smaller battles and skirmishes that spetsnaz fought on patrols or in other circumstances. According to one source, of the approximately 15,000 Soviet troops who lost their lives in Afghanistan, about 800 were Spetsnaz GRU.[162] For Spetsnaz KGB, Valentin Iutov has summarized Kaskad and Omega combat participation as 12 major and about 300 smaller military operations. They also provided target coordinates for about 1,500 bombings of mujahideen formations from fixed-wing aircraft in addition to liquidations of mujahideen commanders and disintegrations of

mujahideen groups.[163] Sergei Kozlov argues that Spetsnaz GRU, while constituting only about 3.2 percent of the total number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, were responsible for about 70 percent of the positive military results.[164] Since Kozlov himself fought for spetsnaz in Afghanistan, this is obviously a biased account, but estimates from non-spetsnaz sources would not necessarily be very different. Considering all this, it would still be wrong to characterize the Soviet war in Afghanistan as a spetsnaz war, but it would be correct to say that these forces played an outsized role.

Spetsnaz tactics and changes to them of course reflected broader fluctuations of Soviet military strategy during the war. Sergei Kozlov talks about the "painstaking efforts to find workable tactics that took place from the very beginning of the war."[165] Once it was clear that the forces would be fighting, and not just deter Afghan opposition or be there in support of the Afghan army, the Soviets deployed a two-pronged strategy. They went in pursuit of mujahideen forces to destroy them directly, and they tried to eliminate their support in the countryside by systematically razing Afghan agriculture. In addition, they tried to conscript as many as they could of the young men from the countryside into the Afghan army.[166] The thinking was probably both that the population would find the costs of supporting the mujahideen too high, and that the mujahideen would not have enough food and other resources to sustain their fighting. The Soviets were wrong about the first assumption but partly right about the second. With more than 7 million people fleeing the countryside, food production and distribution did take a significant hit.[167] The mujahideen became desperate for supplies from neighboring countries. The only solution was to bring in the deficit from abroad using caravans through the mountains. The fight against these dominated the Soviet warfare from 1985 onward, implemented through the Zavesa plan. This plan was in reality the final effort of the Soviet leadership to win the war. Despite some successes, it also failed.

According to the estimates of the 40th Army's own intelligence, the Soviet forces were probably not able to stop more than 15–20 percent of the caravans from Pakistan and Iran.[168] We cannot know for sure if the outcome of the conflict would have been different if that percentage had been significantly higher, but we know that the supplies from abroad, in particular from Pakistan, were a life-or-death issue for the mujahideen.[169]

The Soviet war in Afghanistan could not compare to the one the United States fought in Vietnam, either in troops employed or soldiers lost. Still, in broader terms, GRU head Ivashutin was proven right in his predictions about a "Soviet Vietnam." In 1989, the Soviet Union had to pull out its troops without having been able to make Afghanistan either a communist country or an ally in the geopolitical competition with the United States. The similarities with the events as this book was being written are striking. In May 2020, the *New York Times* published an article on the likely full withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. The title was "How the Taliban Outlasted a Superpower: Tenacity and Carnage," and exchanging "Taliban" for "Mujahideen" in the title could just as easily have described the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. In fact, Taliban chief of staff Amir Khan Mutaqi, who was interviewed for that article, pointed out that several Taliban leaders in the 2000s had also fought the Soviets.[170] Not only was the Afghan insurgency on its way to beat the United States and other Western forces in the same way it had done with the Soviets; it was also done with some of the same people. In August 2021, it was finally over, and Western forces experienced an exit far less organized than the Soviets had seen 32 years earlier.

The costs of the Soviet war had been tremendous in fatalities, material damage, economic costs, and international standing. The decision to withdraw signified the end of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine. This dogma, introduced after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, held that if a country turned socialist and became part

of the pro-Soviet camp it would at the same time lose the right to reverse those policies at a later date. If it tried, the other socialist countries had a right and the duty to intervene militarily to prevent defection. Now, however, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had given up on holding back socialist Afghanistan by force. In other socialist countries, many saw this as a signal. Maybe they also now would be allowed to go without risking foreign intervention. In this way, one may argue, as Douglas Borer has, that Afghanistan was the first nail in the coffin of both the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union itself.[171]

Furthermore, the war had also taken a big toll on the Soviet population's trust in its own political regime. When the communist system itself crashed, the scar from the war in Afghanistan was at least one of the causes for that downfall.[172] The Soviets had entered Afghanistan with a relatively clear goal for what they wanted to accomplish. However, the many separate battles they won were not enough to defeat the insurgency. The collateral and not-so-collateral damage they caused was enough to turn more or less the entire Afghan population against them.

With the rapidly following cataclysmic event of the fall of the Soviet Union, there was little time or energy in the Kremlin and the General Staff to learn from the mistakes made in Afghanistan. This meant that, when the Russian military—including spetsnaz—only six years later faced a similar counterinsurgency in Chechnya, many of the mistakes from Afghanistan would be repeated. First, however, spetsnaz had to deal with a number of domestic and international challenges that most officers probably never imagined would come their way.

General Sergei Shtemenko, one of the initiators of Spetsnaz GRU in the 1950s. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (www.mil.ru), distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.)

Alexandr Musienko, Spetsnaz GRU veteran of the Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Chechen wars. He was one of those who started the organizational experiments at Senezh that led to the official establishment of the SSO in 2013. (Photo by Dmitri Beliakov. Used with permission of the photographer.)

Naval special forces from the 17th Brigade of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet in the 1970s. (Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

Special Operations Command buggy winter training. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (www.mil.ru), distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

Soldiers from the Special Operations Command. Picture published in connection with the celebration of the Special Operations Forces Day on 27 February. The day is in memory of the first part of the annexation of Crimea in 2014. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (www.mil.ru), distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

Russian naval special operations forces operator with an APS rifle. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (www.mil.ru), distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

Alpha Group, an elite, stand-alone subunit of Russia's special forces and a dedicated counterterrorism task force of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). (Distributed under the Creative Commons Share-Alike 3.0 Unported license.)

Exercise at the Alpha Group headquarters. (Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

Parachute training at the 14th SzGRU Brigade in the Eastern Military District in 2017. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (www.mil.ru), distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.)

Parachute training with the new Arbalet-2 parachute system for the 22nd SzGRU Brigade. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (www.mil.ru), distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.)

Group of Spetsnaz GRU after a combat mission near the village of Tokhram in Afghanistan in 1988. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (www.mil.ru), distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

3

NAVIGATING BREAKDOWN, 1989—2008

The Tajik warlord slowly raised his arm.[1] With a smile, he put a gun to SzGRU Lieutenant Sergei Kolosov's head. Roughly 20 ragtag militia silently encircled the two in this abandoned movie theater courtyard in southern Tajikistan. It was autumn 1992, and Kolosov had a split-second to consider his options. He decided that the gesture had to be a prank. Snatching the gun away with his right hand, he froze the Tajik's other hand with his left. Next, he unceremoniously emptied the magazine of the gun into a hollow grenade box five meters away. Looking up, he was relieved to recognize traces of respect on the faces surrounding him.

Surprisingly, the warlord's embarrassment was gone in no time. He suggested they both engage in a friendly shooting competition at beer bottles. Kolosov, however, was not ready for that. His initial fear had transformed into anger. In fact, he was fuming about what had just transpired. He therefore countered the warlord's innocent suggestion with a proposal for the two of them to play Russian roulette. Grabbing a revolver from the Tajik's belt, he started emptying the barrel. "All but one!" he yelled into his opponent's face. "Who goes first?" The warlord did not see through the fraud. He completely lost his grin. Diffidently, he said "you." Kolosov spun the barrel, put the gun to his head, and pulled the trigger. Nothing. The Tajik took the revolver back with terror in his eyes. He opened the barrel to check for the unspent cartridge. The barrel was completely empty. He pondered the con and his own gullibility for several seconds. Then, he broke out laughing. The whole group laughed. The warlord invited Kolosov for tea.

These events took place in the city of Kurgan-Tyube in southwestern Tajikistan. The country's civil war was about six months old. Kolosov commanded a SzGRU detachment from the 16th Brigade out of Chuchkovo near Ryazan in central Russia. They had been sent to Kurgan-Tyube to assist the 191st Regiment of the 201st Division stationed in the city. The regiment's main mission was to guard one of the division's armories that was located in a warehouse. The weapons storage contained enough small arms and ammunition to equip about 2,500 men. In addition, there was also a number of artillery pieces and armored vehicles as well as one main battle tank there. Both sides in the war for obvious reasons had their eyes fixed on this depository.

The whole division was in essence caught in the crossfire between the warring sides, and the situation was becoming untenable. On the surface, the war was a conflict between the remains of the secular communist establishment on the one hand (the Iurchiki) and a mix of self-declared democrats and Islamists on the other (the Vovchiki). In reality, it was mostly a struggle for power between mixes of regional clans and organized crime. The Iurchiki came mainly from the rural southwest and the city of Kuliab, the Vovchiki came from the central region, the city of Garm, and the Pamir Mountains. It is true, however, that the Vovchiki had a stronger Islamist element in their ranks than their opponents. They also received some weapons and training from the Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Afghanistan.[2] Still, the conflict was fueled mainly by regional loyalties.[3]

The Russian Armed Forces themselves had been created only in May 1992 out of the remains of the major bulk of the Soviet Armed Forces, and the 201st joined officially only on 9 September. Here, none but the higher officers were ethnic Russian. The rest were mostly local Tajiks. Russia was in principle neutral in this war in the now independent Tajikistan, but the sympathy, at least among the officers of the 201st, was squarely with the Iurchiki.

Kolosov had arrived in Chuchkovo to take charge of the battalion there upon graduating from the prestigious Frunze Academy (Army Staff College) back in the summer of 1992. Times were exceptional in Russia. The Soviet Union had broken up just six months earlier, and communist rule was gone. Both upheavals had given birth to a severe economic crisis. Kolosov hardly had time to meet with his troops before he needed to hurry them off to assist in the local vegetable harvest. A direct appeal from the mayor of Moscow had pleaded the spetsnaz forces for help. The dangers of the Cold War were over, and few were concerned with security politics and military preparations. Kolosov, however, saw things differently. Small conflicts had already begun to flare up in several locations in the former Soviet empire. He was absolutely convinced that his troops would soon be called upon to fight somewhere, and for this contingency they needed training. Thus, Kolosov spent much time wrestling his company commanders and brigade superiors for permission to withdraw his men from "the battle for the vegetables." He wanted them to spend their time preparing for combat instead. A month later, the phone rang. Kolosov was told to have his men ready for deployment in 24 hours.[4]

By evening the day after the call, Kolosov's subordinates were already boarding an Il-76 military transport plane. He himself received a map of Tajikistan. Finally, he knew where they were going. Early the following morning, they descended on to the Kakaidy Airfield just north of Termez in southern Uzbekistan. At noon the same day, the deputy defense minister of that country arrived at the same place. He explained to the newly disembarked Russians that his country was seriously worried about what was happening next door. Also, the Russian 201st Division stationed there was in trouble. Kolosov and his men, as well as another spetsnaz detachment from Chuchkovo, would be flown into the neighboring country with helicopters. The others would go to Kuliab, Kolosov's to Kurgan-Tyube. Before departure, Kolosov got the shortest intelligence brief of his life. This was given by the later legendary SzGRU commander Vladimir Kvachkov: "The

Tajiks are divided between the Vovchiki and the Iurchiki. The Vovchiki are scum, the Iurchiki are ours. The rest is up to you."[5]

In Kurgan-Tyube, the local Russian commander had until the arrival of the spetsnaz forces tried to maintain neutrality. That was in line with the political directives from Moscow. Kolosov, however, keeping in mind Kvachkov's short briefing, almost immediately decided it was necessary to take sides. He thought that if the Russians combined their forces with the Kurgan-Tyube Iurchiki, they may be able to establish a military dominance strong enough to deter the Vovchiki form further attacks. There was, however, as far as Kolosov could see, no unified Iurchik command in the area with whom to ally. Thus, to approach their prospective allies, the spetsnaz commanders decided to start by contacting the numerically strongest among the Iurchik groups. In Kurgan-Tyube, the choice fell on the 300-man band of the warlord Faisali Saidov. This was the very same warlord who later would put the gun to Kolosov's head. In addition to personal firearms, this Iurchik group also had at their disposal a number of APCs and one T-80 tank. Faisali was more than happy to cooperate, but he was also quick to attempt to take advantage of his new partner. During Kolosov's and Faisali's first meeting, the latter said little more than "hi, how are you" and "give us guns and ammunition!"[6]

Very soon, the Iurchiki called Spetsnaz GRU to their assistance. Twenty to thirty enemy Vovchiki had taken control over a small mountain pass on the way from Dangara to Kurgan-Tyube. Thus, they effectively cut off all communication between the Iurchiki of the two towns. This time, it was the head of the Dangara Iurchiki who asked the Russians for help. Kolosov, however, knew that the Dangara commander controlled up to 300 men. Given this sizable number, it was not clear to him why the Tajik needed his help. With numerical superiority, he should be able to easily oust the few Vovchiki from the pass on his own. Nonetheless, Kolosov dispatched his deputy commander north together with a platoon for assistance. When the

Russians entered Dangara, however, it soon became clear why the Iurchiki needed support. The 300 local fighters were simply too unorganized for any kind of joint operation. Furthermore, they possessed only one rifle for every third fighter. Kolosov's deputy, seeing this powerlessness, decided that the best way forward was to pummel the pass with artillery. After that, he could send in only his own men. By the time the spetsnaz soldiers entered the Vovchiki positions, most of the latter had been cut to pieces. The same was also true for an unidentified number of civilians who lived there. Those who survived had dispersed, and the spetsnaz took control without any additional fighting.

Through Faisali, Kolosov at the end of October also met the godfather of the Iurchiki, Sangak Safarov. This veteran of Tajik organized crime was at the time more than sixty years old. He had spent 26 of these in prison. Safarov told Kolosov that at his age he would normally have devoted all his time to help raising the grandchildren. That, however, was not possible because of the Vovchiki. Safarov praised Russia and thanked Kolosov profoundly for his "recent assistance." Since the two had just met, Kolosov had no idea what Safarov was referring to. It turned out, however, that by securing the Kurgan-Tyube armory, Kolosov had taken a burden off Safarov's shoulders. No longer having to worry that the Vovchiki might get their hands on those weapons, Safarov had been able to redeploy parts of his troops from Kurgan-Tyube to take care of other problems farther south.

The Russian roulette episode notwithstanding, a brittle trust developed between Kolosov and Faisali. Still, Kolosov was regularly dazed and dismayed by the brutality of his new ally. Once, entering Faisali's office, Kolosov walked straight into an execution. A man was on his knees, begging for his life. Faisali calmly explained to Kolosov that this man had fled to Russia when the civil war began. Now, after his comrades had "filled rivers with blood in fighting the Vovchiki," the fugitive had had the audacity to come back to ask for a job. After

this rationalization, Faisali matter-of-factly shot the man in the head. Kolosov watched as Faisali's subordinates dragged the body of the still only half-dead job-seeker away.

Another time, Kolosov was annoyed when one of the Iurchik commanders started promising ethnic Tajiks in the 201st better pay if they left the Russian division and joined him instead. Kolosov complained about the recruiting business to Safarov. A few days later, the recruiter lay dead in a coffin with Safarov presenting his eulogy.

In yet another episode, Kolosov entered the same movie theater courtyard where Faisali had earlier put the gun to his head. This time, a few terrified men he had not seen before were lined up against a wall. It turned out that they were from the Pamir Mountains, where many sympathized with the Vovchiki. About 25 meters away from them, a group of Faisali's men were crowding behind an AGS-17 grenade launcher. Faisali's second-in-command was about to let the Pamiris have it when Kolosov cried out "Faisali, what are you doing?"

Faisali: "But Sergei, these reptiles killed our brothers in Dushanbe. They should die like dogs themselves!"

Kolosov: "You mean to say that it was exactly these individuals who killed your brothers?"

Faisali: "No, of course not, but these are also Pamiris"

Kolosov: "Listen Faisali, I have something to talk with you about, can we go for a smoke first?"

Faisali gave a sign for the Pamiris to sit down and walked outside with Kolosov. The latter engaged in a long exchange with both Faisali and later Safarov. He argued how massacring random Pamiris would make the Iurchiki no better than the Vovchiki. It would also destroy the possibilities for peace in Tajikistan once the expected Iurchik victory was a fact. The logic of the arguments failed to convince, but Kolosov was still able to secure a deal with Safarov. The Russians

would be allowed to take the Pamiris under temporary custody. In return, Safarov would get a large amount of diesel for his trucks. After dark, the Russians quietly transported the Pamiris away to Dushanbe. Safarov later claimed that the Russians had tricked him, but he always smiled when he said this.

The spetsnaz forces stayed in Kurgan-Tyube for roughly two months. Kolosov had achieved what was expected in terms of protecting the Kurgan-Tyube regiment and especially its armory. In addition, few among the ethnic Russian population of the city had suffered substantially. Faisali and Safarov, however, soon fell out. They both died in a shootout between each other in March 1993.

By the end of November, it was clear that the Iurchiki would win the war. On 10 December, they entered the capital of Dushanbe. Some hostilities continued all the way until 1997, but the main phase of the fighting was from May 1992 until the end of that year. The Tajik Popular Front now established Emomali Rakhmon as the new leader of the country. As of the time of publication of this book, Rakhmon is still head of state in Tajikistan.

SPETSNAZ AND THE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE 1990S

In the turmoil created by the fall of communism and the Soviet Union itself, the critical political role of small elite forces came to the fore. In the 1957 Zhukov Affair, the potential use of Spetsnaz GRU in a domestic power struggle was a dreaded possibility. In the early 1990s, politicians twice put Spetsnaz KGB on the spot in terms of siding with one or the other side in a domestic power struggle. In these situations, their choices could potentially have a direct impact on which way the country would go. In both cases, the opposing factions claimed to represent the true government of the country. These were episodes of intense stress for commanders and subordinates. For Vympel, it led to a temporary loss in status for the unit.

The Spetsnaz GRU was spared from direct involvement in domestic power struggles. Still, these forces also found it difficult to remain the neutral policy implementers that they were supposed to be. Several times, Spetsnaz GRU found themselves in situations where political orders were absent or of a kind they found impossible to implement. This happened during the civil war in Tajikistan. Furthermore, in one instance spetsnaz troops may have been involved directly in one of the first political murders of post-Soviet Russia. These and other experiences instilled serious distrust of politicians among many spetsnaz officers. A few of them over time developed into staunch regime opponents. In the most extreme case, Vladimir Kvachkov, one of the most legendary of all currently living Spetsnaz GRU officers, was in 2013 sentenced to 13 years in prison for trying to organize a state coup. In addition to troubled relations with the political leadership, the now Russian and no longer Soviet Spetsnaz GRU experienced three further calamities during these years.

First, for 15 years after the regime change and the fall of the Soviet Union, much of the Russian military lived in poverty. This was the case also for Spetsnaz GRU. The situation did not improve until the mid-2000s. Only at that time did high oil prices again allow for higher defense outlays. In turn, that led to more acceptable conditions of service and significant rearmament.

Second, all Russian military officers experienced a dramatic fall in social prestige. In Soviet times, the military, and especially the spetsnaz, had been seen and had seen themselves as an obvious part of society's elite. With the introduction of a market economy, however, business executives and bureaucrats with connections to private capital started to crowd them out. That made many military officers bitter. Why would they risk their lives fighting with outdated guns when those who had sent them themselves spent the government's money to build private mansions outside Moscow or summerhouses in Nice? Many of the best officers, including those from Spetsnaz GRU, left the army during this period. In the early 1990s, the Russian armed

forces may have lost as many as 45,000 officers annually.[7] Still, the social status of spetsnaz personnel may have suffered somewhat less than it did for the military in general. The military journalist Aleksei Nikolskii argues that, despite the poverty and the corruption, it was in the 1990s that the domestic "legend of Spetsnaz GRU" was fully established.[8]

Third, Spetsnaz GRU was split between the Soviet successor states in the same way as the other branches and services of the Soviet armed forces. For Moscow, that meant a decrease in the number of troops. Of the 15 SzGRU brigades that existed at the end of 1991, Russia was left with eight. Two of the others were disbanded, Ukraine inherited three, and Belarus and Uzbekistan inherited one each. In addition, Russia also inherited some of the smaller spetsnaz companies around the country, but many of these were also taken over by the other new states. On the naval side, only one MRP was taken over by another country. This was the 1464th MRP at Ochakov near Odessa, which was taken over by Ukraine.[9]

All these events took place against the background of a strong general distrust in the new political leadership in Russia among the military. One of the most spectacular displays of the military's misgivings was the January 1992 All-Service Officer Assembly in the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow. Here, about 5,000 military officers from all the armed forces terrified the new Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, by whistling and stamping their feet. They demanded nothing less than the restoration of the Soviet Union.[10]

Still, toward the end of the decade, the situation had somewhat stabilized. Both Spetsnaz KGB, now renamed Spetsnaz FSB, and Spetsnaz GRU were by this time heavily engaged in the Second Chechen War (1999–2009). Although neither arms nor military organization and doctrine had been modernized, control and direction was to some extent reestablished at the political level. This fact rebuilt

at least some trust in the country's political leadership among spetsnaz officers.

The earliest test of political loyalty came in August 1991, while the Soviet Union was still alive. At that time, a group of top-ranking pro-Soviet hardliners decided to depose President Mikhail Gorbachev in a coup. They argued that this was necessary to rescue the country from what they saw as his failing policy of keeping the Soviet Union together. The coup collapsed after only three days. Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian republic, was the key figure in resisting the coup. He urged the Russian people to support him, and together with backers from the Russian parliament he took refuge in the parliament's building, the White House. Outside, armed and unarmed civilian supporters formed a protective ring. Iurii Petrov, head of Yeltsin's administration, remembers that the president's people were ready for armed resistance against the coup-plotters from the beginning. According to him, the White House almost immediately turned into a military base where people walked around in camouflage gear carrying automatic rifles.[11] Thus, the coup would not succeed unless the plotters were able to garner enough armed support to storm this headquarters. Both Alpha and Vympel were for this reason instrumental in the breakdown of the coup by refusing to take sides when asked to do so. If the coup-makers had received promises of support from one or both these spetsnaz units, the former may have deposed both Yeltsin and Gorbachev. Such a turn of events could potentially have prevented the collapse of the Soviet Union and even saved some version of Soviet communism.

One of the central coup-makers was head of the KGB, Vladimir Kriuchkov. He had always been especially close to Alpha. Nevertheless, in his memoirs, he is adamant that he never gave any order for Alpha to storm the White House.[12] That is probably true, but it does not mean that he never thought about or planned for such a storming. In fact, the Alpha commander Viktor Karpukhin remembers

that Kriuchkov ordered him to station about 200 Alpha operators only a short distance from the building, and Alpha had also been sent to Yeltsin's dacha (summer house) to potentially arrest him when he was still there.[13] Furthermore, the KGB chairman also told Karpukhia that Alpha may be asked to use force to "isolate" the building. Kriuchkov on this occasion emphasized, however, that such an operation had to take place without the slightest injury to anyone. Karpukhin retorted that this would be impossible. If Alpha was to use force to take control over a building surrounded by 5,000–6,000 civilians, this would one way or another lead to what he called an "ocean of blood." Kriuchkov offered no immediate response to this assessment. Karpukhin, however, was constantly worried that he would receive the order to go ahead. In case that should happen, he gathered his men and informed them of what may come. He ended by saying that they should "decide for themselves whether they wanted to take part in something like this or not." Most of those present said they would not use force to take control of the White House. They would refuse such an order even if it came from Kriuchkov himself.[14] In the end, Karpukhin never heard back from Kriuchkov on the use of force.[15] Despite that, the episode had put Alpha under serious stress.

While Karpukhin, on behalf of Alpha, had not rejected using force, Vympel kept a distance to the whole affair from the beginning. They did mobilize for high readiness, but they never relocated or prepared for potential action in the same way Alpha did. In fact, the head of the First Directorate of the KGB and Vympel's immediate superior, Leonid Sherbashin, demonstratively had his photo taken playing tennis on the first day of the coup. This photo was spread to the press to demonstrate that neither Sherbashin nor Vympel had anything to do with whatever Kriuchkov might be up to.

The somewhat different roles played by Alpha and Vympel may have been a result of Kriuchkov's close relations with Alpha.[16] However, Sherbashin's demonstrative tennis match may also have been

related to a rift within the KGB that only later has become apparent. Gennadii Burbulis, who many at the time saw as Yeltsin's "grey cardinal," later confirmed that there was a split in the KGB and that "many Komitetchiki had no interest in a coup."[17] Parts of the organization, in particular people connected to the First Directorate, had actually been some of the drivers for change in the Soviet Union. Many people working in the First Directorate, because of their areas of responsibility, were the ones with the best understanding of how far behind the West their own country was. From this knowledge, a number of them had formed the opinion that communism had to go. Some kind of capitalism was the only way to save the country's great power status.[18] Such ideas and motives were most probably less widespread in the parts of the KGB that dealt with domestic security. These subservices had neither the opportunities nor the foreign knowledge and experience of their colleagues in foreign intelligence. Thus, in a sense, Alpha and Vympel may have been the armed wings of increasingly divergent factions within the KGB. That may be part of the explanation why Vympel demonstrated maximum distance from the coup at the same time as Alpha seemed more in doubt about which side to support.

The second test of spetsnaz loyalty occurred two years later, during the October 1993 constitutional crisis. Again, politicians put Alpha and Vympel on the spot. By this time, the old KGB had been dissolved. The two former Spetsnaz KGB units were now subordinated to the Kremlin's Main Guards Directorate, an organization similar to the US Secret Service. Gorbachev had signed an order to split the KGB into several different organizations in October 1991.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, relations between the president of (now independent) Russia, Boris Yeltsin, and a coalition of Russian nationalists, imperialists and communists had grown ever more tense. These anti-Yeltsin forces also included a number of individuals who

had stood by his side in 1991 but later became disappointed in his agenda. Together, those forces now dominated the Russian parliament. The conflict was both ideological and constitutional. The two sides in particular disagreed over Russia's orientation toward the West and the adoption of a Western economic model. They also fought over how much power the president should have relative to the parliament. The frictions came to a peak in September 1993. At that time, Yeltsin signed a decree that dissolved what he saw as an unreasonably rebellious parliament. This decree led to a repetition of the 1991 standoff. The only difference was that this time the antireform forces occupied the White House. Again, people's deputies started walking the halls with automatic rifles. Supporters of the anti-Yeltsin parliamentary majority also clashed with police on the streets of Moscow. Some of them even tried but failed to take control of the Ostankino television tower. To put an end to the turmoil, Yeltsin suggested to the General Staff that they bring tanks to the parliament. These were to fire a few shots at the building for psychological effect. After such a show of force, he elaborated, spetsnaz troops could enter to clear the premises. The generals let the tanks do their job, but no spetsnaz clearing followed.

Again, Alpha and Vympel had to make hard choices. This time again, both units declined to use force. However, it seems that, at least initially, the Alpha leadership did not express reservations. But when officers of a lower rank understood what was asked of them, there was a small rebellion. These lower-rank commanders did not flat-out refuse to follow orders, but they demanded a verdict from the Constitutional Court that what they might be asked to do would be legal. Absent that, they stated, they would not proceed. Yeltsin, however, had no time for such legalism. To break the impasse, a direct meeting between the president and the partly mutinying officers from both special forces was arranged. About 40 officers from the two units were present in the room when Yeltsin entered. He asked them directly whether they, if he ordered, would obey and clear the White

House by force. He received only silence in response. The impasse initially continued, but soon after the meeting some spetsnaz operatives decided to take the matter into their own hands. Several officers from both Alpha and Vympel on their own accord entered the White House—but only to negotiate.

The immediate reason for this initiative was that Alpha Lieutenant Gennadii Sergeev had been shot and killed while exiting a BMP close to the building. He was on his way to assist a wounded person. According to Alpha Colonel Vladimir Kelekhsaev, who was one of the first to go into the White House, the bullet that hit Sergeev had not come from inside the building. Recollecting the episode 15 years later, Kelekhsaev was adamant that some "third force" had shot Sergeev. He suspected the reason had been to make Alpha and Vympel reconsider their reluctance to participate in a violent outcome. After this attempt at escalation, both units recognized that someone had to enter the building to talk to the parliament members. There was an urgent need to put an end to the standoff. If not, "third forces" could through continued provocations eventually succeed in getting spetsnaz forces to turn violent.[19]

Kelekhsaev and subordinate Sergei Kuzmin created an improvised white flag. As they moved toward the main door, bullets started ricocheting in front of them. They could hear at least five shots fired. The shooting, however, again did not appear to come from the White House. None of the bullets did any damage, and the men reached the building unscathed. Before entering, and in full view of the occupiers, they set down their automatic rifles on the entrance stairs. Still, for their own protection, Kelekhsaev had hidden three grenades in different pockets of his uniform. He would threaten to use these in case someone tried to take him and Kuzmin hostage.

Once inside, two representatives of the rebellious parliamentarians met them. They carried automatic rifles and demanded to know who the intruders were. When Kelekhsaev and Kuzmin said they belonged to the Alpha special operations force, the two defenders lowered their

guns. Next, they took the two Alpha commanders to the parliament's main assembly hall. There, about 400 members sat huddled in darkness in the amphitheater. Each was holding a candle. That was the only means of lighting in the building since the power had been cut. Kelekhsaev headed straight for the lectern. He told the deputies that the president had ordered Alpha to clear the parliament by force. However, he immediately added, the spetsnaz troops themselves did not want to do this. Instead, they wanted the deputies to depart peacefully. Kelekhsaev also made it clear that this was most likely the parliamentarians' last chance. If they refused to surrender now, other units may enter that did not have the same scruples against the use of force as Alpha did. Here, Kelekhsaev was aided by the fact that much of the will to resist had already left the White House occupants. The shelling of the building by tanks had taken its toll psychologically. Nevertheless, someone among the deputies yelled out to Kelekhsaev: "What guarantees do we have that we will not be shot if we surrender?" Kelekhsaev could respond only that he gave them his word as an officer. There was no vote on the matter. Given the obvious lack of resolve among most deputies to continue the fight, the outcome was clear to all.

At the same time as Kelekhsaev and Kuzmin entered through the front door, a small group of Vympel operators had gone into the building through a back entrance. They were in contact with Kelekhsaev and Kuzmin, and they found their way to the offices where the leaders of the occupiers, Aleksandr Rutskoy and Ruslan Khasbulatov, had their headquarters. When the Vympel operators informed Rutskoy and Khasbulatov about the mood in the assembly hall, they also agreed to give in. Thus, the whole building was cleared of armed and unarmed rebellious parliamentarians without any use of violence. Those arrested were led to waiting buses protected by a corridor of Alpha and Vympel operators. After this ending, both special forces returned to the Kremlin. There, they were congratulated on a successful mission and were served sandwiches and

vodka. It was impossible for the Russian leadership to treat those who had secured a bloodless end to the White House uprising in any other way, even if they had acted on their own initiative.

Yeltsin later wrote in his memoirs that he considered the mostly nonviolent ending of the 1993 uprising "his main victory" in the constitutional struggle.[20] Still, despite the celebratory mood, Yeltsin could not forget the silent response of the 40 Alpha and Vympel commanders when he had asked them to fight for him. If these units could not be trusted to do his bidding at such a time of crisis, he would be better off having them wing-clipped.

In his memoir *Prezidentskii Marafon* (The president's marathon), Yeltsin remembered with unconcealed disgust "the officers without convictions" who had let him down.[21] In the end, Alpha survived largely untouched, but this was by no means a given. Alpha commander Valerii Zaitsev is certain that Yeltsin would have closed down the unit if not for the intervention of the head of the Kremlin Main Guard Directorate, Mikhail Barsukov. The latter was a close Yeltsin confidante. Barsukov threatened to resign if Yeltsin dissolved Alpha.[22]

Vympel, however, took a much more serious hit. The unit was not disbanded, but it was resubordinated to the troops of the Ministry of the Interior.[23] For most Vympel officers, this was an insult in the extreme. Established and trained to conduct the most high-profile covert operations abroad on direct orders of the political leadership, they were now demoted to domestic law enforcement. Vympel commander Dmitrii Gerasimov grumbled that they had been selected and educated to protect the motherland as special operations forces and not as police officers. Of the more than 200 operators who served in Vympel, only about 20 agreed to continue serving as part of the Interior troops.[24] The Vympel that Drozdov had formed in 1981 no longer existed.

The two constitutional crises in 1991 and 1993 were the most challenging for Spetsnaz FSB in terms of domestic power struggles. Still, their potential loyalties continued to figure in the calculations of different political forces also after that. When Russian liberals fought for influence in the Kremlin with President Yeltsin's bodyguard and former KGB strongman Aleksandr Korzhakov in 1996, they were well aware that if they became too aggressive Korzhakov could call in Spetsnaz FSB against them. Similarly, when Yeltsin dismissed the head of the Security Council, Aleksandr Lebed, the same year, buses with Spetsnaz KGB operators parked in the courtyard of the Security Council's buildings. Lebed had presidential ambitions and strong support in the army. Yeltsin and his closest advisers feared he might refuse to step down.[25]

As mentioned above, in contrast to Spetsnaz KGB, Spetsnaz GRU was spared from direct involvement in power struggles at the top. Nevertheless, internally they strived with their own coup-related problems. Some officers supported the coup-makers and others did not. Tensions between adherents of the old order and the new order erupted in several brigades. That was true before and after the attempted overthrow. For example, Major Oleg Golybin, who would later play a central role in the SzGRU-orchestrated overthrow of the government of Tajikistan, was squarely on the side of the coup-makers. He recalls that, when ordinary citizens gathered in large numbers to defend Yeltsin and the White House against a possible storming by Spetsnaz KGB, he started to prepare his own men for potential action in support of his KGB colleagues. He told them that, if it came to the point where they needed to fire at civilians, they should understand that "through their sights they would not see their own people but their enemies—the mercenaries of destructive forces."[26]

In another example, the political polarization created by the attempted coup developed into open conflict within the 14th SzGRU

Brigade in the Russian Far East. Here, many older officers supported the coup-makers while many of the younger ones did not. When news of the attempted takeover reached the unit, brigade commander Colonel Iakov Kurys gathered all his subordinate officers. He told them "finally someone will bring back order to the country." He gleefully added that now "all shit-head democrats will be decimated."[27] After it was clear that the coup had failed, a group of younger officers within the brigade organized a meeting to denounce the commander and demand that he be relieved of his command. The pressure against Kurys continued to grow, and in the end he resigned.

However, the most challenging aspect of regime change for the Spetsnaz GRU officers was that they on several occasions found themselves in situations where they saw action as unavoidable, although political leadership was either absent or in conflict with itself. Normally, the main issue in civil-military relations is how to keep the military out of politics.[28] Here, the situation was the opposite. The military leaders desperately felt they needed political directives that were not forthcoming. Did that mean they should stand back from dealing with problems they thought could have potentially serious negative strategic consequences for the country they were still serving?

One particular challenge was the fate of tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Kazakhstan. In February 1992, Russia and the five Central Asian republics as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan created the United Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States. This organization was meant to prolong the life of the existing unified military command for all these countries for at least five more years. All parties agreed not to initiate the formation of separate armed forces until the five-year period was over. Adherence to this arrangement, however, was slack from the beginning. In practice, the settlement became little more than diplomatic cover for a de facto

bottom-up division of military assets. Each new state took into possession whatever was located on its territory.

In Soviet Central Asia, all forces had belonged to the Turkestan Military District, or TMD. This organization had its headquarters in Tashkent in Uzbekistan. Among the assets of the TMD was the famous 40th Army that had fought the war in Afghanistan. The 40th soon became part of the armed forces of Kazakhstan. According to the commander of the TMD at the time, General Georgii Kondratev, this happened in the way that the commander of the 40th, General Anatolii Riabtsev, simply sent Kondratev a telegram. Here, Riabtsev informed his superior that he was now taking the 40th with him and leaving the TMD. Instead, this unit would now be subordinated to the president of the newly independent Kazakhstan.[29] Riabtsev motivated his decision with a need for clarity. He was tired of continually receiving conflicting orders about which military equipment should go where. The contradictory instructions coming from Kazakhstan and the TMD could not be reconciled. Therefore Riabtsev, in his own words, chose to "act according to the laws of the country on whose territory the troops were located."[30]

Kondratev, however, lamented Riabtsev's "defection" as treason. He compared Riabtsev to the Soviet General Andrei Vlasov who cooperated with the Nazis during World War II. It was not, however, entirely clear which motherland Riabtsev was supposed to have betrayed. If it was the Soviet Union, that country no longer existed. If it was Russia, it was unclear why this nation, rather than Kazakhstan, should maintain ownership. After all, the army was physically located in Kazakhstan.

What made the conflict over the 40th Army particularly delicate was that it had in its armory a number of tactical nuclear weapons. Kondratev was convinced that Riabtsev, if asked, would refuse to hand them back to Russia. Thus, in Kondratev's opinion, the only option was to steal the nukes from Riabtsev and the Kazakh leadership. It is to

this day not clear whether the Kazakh authorities actually would have held on to the weapons if asked to hand them over. It is not even clear if they were aware of their existence.

Kondratev, however, had a problem. He commanded no troops in Kazakhstan that could undertake the mission. Nevertheless, he did have the 15th SzGRU Brigade in Chirchik, Uzbekistan, close by. This was before that unit transferred to the armed forces of Uzbekistan. Furthermore, it was led by Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, later famous for toppling Tajikistan's government. Kondratev knew Kvachkov as a capable, above-average, risk-accepting officer. He was exactly the man for such a daring job.[31] Thus, on the night of 17 March 1992, Kondratev dispatched Kvachkov and a group of spetsnaz operators into Kazakhstan. In the course of six hours, these men took all remaining tactical nuclear warheads from their storage facilities and brought them up to the Russian border. There, special railway cars were waiting to transport them farther into Russia. Both Kondratev and Kvachkov were convinced they were acting in the interest of Russia in this case, even if no Moscow politician had told them to do what they did. They decided that, if their own politicians either did not care or did not know what was best for the country, then those who did were entitled to act. This was a principle that Kvachkov would later take to the extreme when he played an instrumental role in toppling the government of Tajikistan.

Vladimir Kvachkov, son of a military officer from the Russian Far East with a strong attraction to conspiracy theories, became and still is a legend among SzGRU operators. He entered service with the 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade in Pskov in 1969, finishing at the Frunze Academy higher staff college with distinction in 1981. He fought in Afghanistan and in several post-Soviet hotspots, and for a long time he had a relatively distinguished career. In the years 2004 to 2008, the General Staff even trusted Kvachkov with developing a planning document for the future structure and use of Spetsnaz GRU. That assignment, however, seems to have initiated a radical change of direction for his

life. When his ideas for Spetsnaz GRU reform were rejected, he took offense. Kvachkov later became convinced that it was Russian President Vladimir Putin personally who had put a stop to his proposals for transformation of the organization.[32] After this rebuff, struggle against the political regime in Russia took the place of reform of the SOF as his priority. He declared himself an "orthodox nationalist" with a strong distaste for the economic reforms of the 1990s. By "orthodox" he meant religious adherence to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Kvachkov was arrested for the first time in March 2005. Russian prosecutors accused him of attempting to kill Anatolii Chubais, one of the fathers of Russian market reforms. A roadside bomb exploded next to Chubais's car, and two men wearing combat fatigues sprayed the car with bullets. As if by miracle, nobody was hurt. Kvachkov was almost immediately suspected and, together with two other former military officers, taken into custody. All three, however, were eventually acquitted because of lack of evidence. The day of his acquittal, Kvachkov gave an interview to the radio station Echo Moskvy. He stated that, although the court had proven his innocence, killing Chubais would not have been a crime. The man was a "national traitor and a Quisling." Furthermore, the renowned SzGRU officer added that Russia is "currently occupied by a Jewish mafia that functions as the ⟦mold⟧ for all the other groups of ⟦organized⟧ crime in the country."[33] Presumably, Kvachkov saw President Putin as the head of this Jewish Mafia.

The day after his acquittal, the FSB arrested Kvachkov again. This time, the accusations were even more serious. They detained him for planning to overthrow the Russian government. According to a member of Kvachkov's recently established political movement—The People's Militia Named after Minin and Pozharskii—Kvachkov and about 600 others had planned to start this coup by taking over by force a tank-training unit. This member turned out to be an FSB

informer. The tank unit was located in the city of Kovrov, 266 kilometers east of Moscow. The same source explained that the plotters also intended to take over some nearby artillery arsenals. After this gathering of strength, they would move on the capital.[34] This time, Kvachkov was found guilty. In February 2013, the court sentenced him to 13 years in prison. Later, this sentence was twice reduced. In February 2019, he was again a free man, loudly declaring: "Colonel Kvachkov is ready for more battle."

Both court cases raised suspicions among Russian commentators and in the press. Some saw the plots as too amateurish for Kvachkov to have been behind them. A suspicion arose that the Russian government had cooked them up to put an unruly and radical nationalist behind bars. An anonymous FSB source told the Russian weekly *New Times* in March 2011 that Kvachkov had "seriously spooked Russian authorities during mass demonstrations he helped organise in Kaliningrad." Furthermore, a second anonymous FSB source added that "in our battle with extremism we concentrate on those groups that are able to present the public with a clear ideological platform . . . and that can set off a network creating effect."[35] This was said with direct reference to Kvachkov. A counterargument to these speculations would be that Kvachkov is far too marginalized politically for the Kremlin to worry about him. Exactly what Kvachkov was innocent or guilty of in these two cases is still hard to decipher, but he probably maintains a significant following among former and currently serving spetsnaz personnel. The journalist Andrei Soldatov has argued, based on his talks with anonymous SzGRU sources, that Kvachkov in 2022 became the voice of a significant GRU- and spetsnaz-based opposition to how Putin conducted the war in Ukraine. These officers thought the war was fought with insufficient brutality from the Russian side.[36]

Despite the overall military degradation of the early 1990s, the decade nevertheless also saw the emergence of a new member to the

Russian SOF family. This was the 45th SzVDV Regiment (later brigade) of Airborne forces. The unit grew out of the already existing 218th SzVDV Spetsnaz Battalion but was something new in terms of its scope and size. During the Cold War, the VDV divisions had been subordinated to the different front commanders in case of war. That meant they were to receive operational and especially strategic intelligence from Spetsnaz GRU just like everyone else. The VDV's own reconnaissance units would arrive in the theater of operations together with the rest of the force, not in advance, and they would gather tactical intelligence mostly. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet and later Russian leaderships started to deploy VDV troops to regional hotspots alone or in combination with Ministry of Interior troops. This trend created an urgent need for the VDV to establish its own capacity for gathering in-theater intelligence prior to the deployment of the main force. This was the main cause of the 1994 establishment of the 45th SzVDV Regiment. The unit would predeploy to prepare the ground with intelligence and target identification, after which the arriving VDV main forces would do the fighting.

Although the 45th Regiment went on to become an important SOF capacity for the VDV and Russian forces in general, its early days are stained by yet another attempt to enlist SOF in sorting out the problems of politicians. In fact, the name of the 45th is connected to one of the very first political murders in post-Soviet Russia.

In October 1994, only a couple of months before the outbreak of war in Chechnya, the Russian journalist Dmitrii Kholodov was killed by a briefcase bomb in his office at the newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets*. Five years later, the "father" of the 45th, Colonel Pavel Popovskikh, was charged with the murder. The same was also true for five other officers from the same unit. Popovskikh told investigators that the assassination had taken place under pressure from then–Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev. Grachev was angry because Kholodov had publicized information about corruption in the MOD

and the GRU. Grachev admitted to investigators that he had told Popovskikh to "sort out Kholodov." However, he insisted he had meant only that Popovskikh should "convince and re-educate" the journalist.[37] Popovskikh and the 45th were chosen for this job because Kholodov at the time showed a particular interest in and admiration for this new unit. Thus, it was assumed that they were the ones most likely to get close to him.

During his interrogation, however, Popovskikh insisted that Grachev had demanded more than just conviction and reeducation. He claimed that Grachev had ordered him to "break the legs and shut the mouths of journalists such as Kholodov."[38] In the course of the first nine months of his arrest, Popovskikh told the investigators that he, internally in the VDV, had fought to prevent any kind of physical reprisals toward Kholodov. His superiors, however, had insisted that such measures were a direct order from the minister of defense. They could not be disregarded. The superiors even threatened to disband the apple of his eye, the 45th Regiment, unless Popovskikh got rid of the Kholodov problem. Given the dismemberment of Vympel for disrespecting political orders, there was little reason for Popovskikh to think they would not follow through.

According to Popovskikh himself, however, he still did not give in to pressure. Thus, when he heard about the bomb, the news came as a shock. He hurried back to VDV headquarters to find out what had happened. There, according to Popovskikh, he met a subordinate, Major Vladimir Morozov. The latter matter-of-factly confessed to him: "I did it."[39]

Popovskikh was now certain he had become a liability to Grachev because of what he knew. When he and a few other officers who also knew details about the Kholodov case received an order to go to Chechnya, they became suspicious. The order was for them to all fly in the same helicopter to Grozny. There, they were told to land at the city's football stadium. They all immediately understood that landing

at that stadium at that time was certain death. The crazy order could not be explained in any other way than as evidence that Grachev was trying to get rid of all those who knew. Disobeying a direct order was difficult, but they were saved by the fact that no helicopter pilot was willing to take on such a suicide mission. All of this is according to Popovskikh himself.

Later, in court, all the accused denied any connection to the murder and all were acquitted because of insufficient evidence. Whether Popovskikh and/or some of the others were in fact guilty of killing Kholodov has never been finally established. There were, however, no other suspects.

Despite the Kholodov case, the 45th Regiment became an important SOF asset for Russia. They took part in most Russian military missions abroad and domestically, and until the establishment of the Special Operations Command in 2013 they also double-hatted as a strategic capacity directly under the General Staff in addition to their role in VDV operations.

THE TAJIK CIVIL WAR

As Kolosov experienced in Kurgan-Tyube, the 1992 struggle for power in Tajikistan between descendants of the old communist regime and a loose opposition coalition of Islamists and self-declared democrats was brutal. The latter group was able to force Rakhmon Nabiyev from power in September the same year. Nabiyev had led the country from the Soviet Union and into independence. After his ousting, the Vovchik opposition took control over the capital, Dushanbe. For the Iurchiki and their Spetsnaz GRU supporters, this was a major setback.

In time, the neighboring country of Uzbekistan became more and more concerned that Tajikistan could turn Islamist. They feared the spread of Islamist ideologies into their own country. Furthermore, SzGRU operators also hinted to the Uzbek and Russian leaderships of

possible Iranian support for Islamists. If that was true, the September 1992 Vovchik takeover could be even more detrimental to the stability of Central Asia and to the security of Uzbekistan and Russia. One of Kvachkov's deputies, Major Oleg Golybin, argued that the new powers in Dushanbe would, if left to themselves, "create an anti-Russian and anti-Uzbek state that in time would lead to the development of a bridgehead for reactionary backward looking Islam in Russia's soft underbelly."[40]

At the same time as the conflict went violent in the spring of 1992, the 15th SzGRU Brigade in Chirchik in Uzbekistan was a military unit in search of a country. Neither Russia nor Uzbekistan laid claim to the brigade initially. Colonel Aleksandr Musienko served in the unit at the time. He remembers that "we continued to shoot, jump and run, but we belonged to no one."[41] Then one day, GRU Colonel Vladimir Manchenko arrived in Chirchik from Moscow. He came to clarify to the men what was going to happen to the brigade. Manchenko stated bluntly that the unit logically should belong to Uzbekistan, but he said nothing about how such a transfer was to take place.[42] Uzbekistan, for its part, at that time showed minimal interest in taking it over. Manchenko's visit brought neither clarity nor decision, and it infuriated many of the officers. They felt utterly abandoned by those they had sworn to serve. Some suggested that the whole brigade should just rebel against Moscow's decision. They proposed climbing into their armored vehicles and driving to Russia. If the brigade simply showed up somewhere in the motherland, they did not think Russian authorities would dare to send them back.

Brigade commander Kvachkov, however, was of a different opinion. He was able to convince most of the officers that it would not be a good idea for any military unit to simply force itself upon a country. Russia had made clear it did not want them. His counterproposal was that the brigade on its own accord should petition for inclusion into the newly formed Uzbekistan Armed Forces.

Kvachkov put this proposition to the vote among the roughly 200 officers and warrant officers present. He won a clear majority. Many of those who voted against him resigned and left for Russia, soon replaced by ethnic Uzbeks as well as Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians who had grown up in Uzbekistan.

After the vote, Kvachkov, with new mandate in hand, secured a meeting with Uzbekistan's new minister of defense, General Rustam Akhmedov. Here, he sold the proud history and current capabilities of the unit to such an extent that Akhmedov was shocked to learn he had been on the cusp of losing such as military treasure.

Thus, the 15th SzGRU Brigade formally became part of the armed forces of Uzbekistan. However, there was still a big difference between this formality and the identities and loyalty of the men. As remembered by Aleksandr Musienko, "We counted as officers of Uzbekistan, but we continued to serve Russia."[43] Furthermore, in Tajikistan they fought in unity with their brothers from the Russian 16th Brigade. This was the same Russian unit to which Kolosov and his men belonged. In this war, it was as if the two units belonged to the armed forces of the same country. Russian officer Kolosov and his men occasionally took orders from the now Uzbek officer Kvachkov. The leaderships of both brigades consisted of ethnic Russians who had known each other for years and until very recently belonged to the same organization. Operating in parallel made little sense. For example, when a Vovchik field commander took control over the Shar-Shar mountain pass that connected Kuliab with Dushanbe, Kvachkov of Uzbekistan's 15th SzGRU Brigade came to Breslavskii of Russia's 16th SzGRU Brigade for help. Kvachkov needed armored vehicles to get his troops close enough to the Vovchik positions to take them out. Breslavskii, possibly at considerable personal risk to himself for breaking the principle of Russian neutrality in the conflict, gave Kvachkov three BTR-80s.[44]

There was during the war little or no direct contact between the defense ministries of Uzbekistan and Russia and the Iurchiki. With regard to Russia, almost everything was taken care of by the 16th Brigade. For Uzbekistan, involvement in the effort to get rid of the new rulers in Dushanbe was largely limited to meetings that the Uzbek minister of defense conducted with the leadership of the 15th Brigade every two or three weeks in the Uzbek city of Termez. The Uzbeks initially showed considerable reluctance in supporting the Tajik field commanders, but by the end of October 1992 spetsnaz commanders had been able to convince them to start a full-scale secret armament program for the Popular Front. Furthermore, with Uzbek blessing, Kvachkov now made most of the operational and tactical decisions in the theater of operations himself.

While relations between the 15th and its now Uzbek superiors were generally good, the interactions of the 16th with Moscow were more troubled. Despite the initiatives taken by the spetsnaz forces on the ground, Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev had no interest in joining forces with the Iurchiki to prevent the spread of radical Islam in Central Asia. In addition, he had absolutely zero sympathy for Sangak Safarov. Kozyrev continued to insist that all arms that the Iurchiki in one way or another had taken over from the 201st should be destroyed. Thus, in practice, Moscow ordered Spetsnaz GRU to destroy the weapons of the militia that spetsnaz was in the process of building up. The men on the ground were just not going to let that happen.

Kozyrev himself once came to Kurgan-Tyube. A heap of generals and the Russian ambassador to Dushanbe accompanied him. The purpose seemed to be to familiarize the minister with the local situation and make sure the destruction of arms took place. In this case, the spetsnaz forces resorted to fraud. Diesel was poured over an already shot-up tank that had belonged to the Vovchiki and ignited. The burned-out wreckage was presented to Kozyrev as evidence that Moscow's instructions were taken seriously.[45]

Furthermore, the spetsnaz commanders decided that Kozyrev, once in the area of operations, would need to meet Safarov. Before that meeting, regimental commander General Markulov would try to convince the foreign minister to show Safarov courtesy by not mentioning the latter's criminal past. Safarov, now one of the most powerful men in the country, was embarrassed to talk about his troubled personal history. Kozyrev, however, despite Merkulov's best efforts, decided to open the conversation by asking Safarov how he had been able to secure the backing of his people "with so many years in prison" to his discredit. Safarov was predictably offended. He decided to address Kozyrev ironically as "comrade general" instead of "minister" for the remainder of the visit. After several attempts to stop Safarov from continuing this offensive misnaming, the spetsnaz gave up. Kolosov and his men were certain the dialogue would never have been a success anyway, even if Safarov had not been offended.

Kozyrev himself, however, in his memoir remembers the meeting as entirely friendly. He starts his recollections of the Tajik civil war by saying that Russia "had no excuse for playing a passive role" in the conflict. The rest of the narrative, however, reflects the impressions of an observer rather than those of an actor. He mentions that the Russian military on the ground were in favor of Safarov, but there is very little on any form of Russian strategy or involvement in the conflict. In fact, Kozyrev's recollections largely seem to confirm the lack of Russian political engagement that Spetsnaz GRU had been complaining about.[46]

According to the memoirs of several SzGRU operators, the establishment and organization of the Tajik Popular Front was largely their work. It is of course entirely possible that the spetsnaz operators who took part in the civil war in Tajikistan in the autumn of 1992 later exaggerated their role. However, at least Tim Epkenhans, in one of the most detailed studies of the conflict available, confirms that Spetsnaz GRU's accounts are largely "credible and supported by complimentary

sources."[47] Thus, given the likely credibility of these recollections, one can argue that for the first time in Spetsnaz GRU's history, individual commanders in the field made strategic and political decisions concerning the political future of a foreign country. That would normally have been the exclusive domain of Kremlin leaders.

Moreover, the Tajik civil war was also the first time that Spetsnaz GRU was able to organize and train for an actual insurgency abroad. This had been an important part of their doctrine and training since the 1960s, but they never got to use those skills in a war with NATO. True, they had done something similar in the African conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, but this was always on the side of the government. It had been counterinsurgency instead of insurgency. Also true, the Crimean school of insurgency from the mid-1960s and onward had trained antigovernment forces. That, however, had been a comparatively limited activity, and it took place within the safety of Soviet territory.

As mentioned, the Spetsnaz GRU "political entrepreneurship" on behalf of Uzbekistan, and in his own mind probably also Russia, started with Kvachkov through Kolosov taking contact with the Iurchiki commanders Safonov and Faisali in late September 1992. These commandants first of all wanted antitank weapons.

For spetsnaz forces, however, it soon became clear that the Iurchiki would need more than arms transfers if they were to be successful. On 30 September, Kolosov handed over a party of 80 RPG-18 antitank rocket launchers to Safarov and Faisali. This was arguably the first major step in the Spetsnaz GRU's effort to change the political leadership of Tajikistan.

Although the RPG-18 is not a particularly complicated weapon, the Iurchiki had no idea how to use it. Consequently, they initially threw them aside. Worse than this technological incompetence, however, was the fact that the Iurchiki had no central leadership. When Kvachkov and Musienko tried to create such a leadership, they met fierce resistance. Any Iurchik commander that the two had talks with

would declare that he was the only one who selflessly fought for the happiness of the Tajik people. All the other commanders were in the struggle exclusively to enrich themselves.

Nevertheless, Safarov with Spetsnaz GRU's help was gradually able to establish at least some kind of central leadership under his command. It seems that this was mostly the result of him being the most successful in killing off competitors. Furthermore, Safarov's ally Faisali was more successful than the rest in siphoning off weapons from the 201st. In this way, a more or less unified movement operating as "The Popular Front of Tajikistan" grew into existence. Golybin, however, later recognized that the spetsnaz forces always tended to overestimate what they had achieved in terms of a unified Popular Front leadership. He thinks his men never gained a sufficient understanding of the underlying territorially and regionally based conflicts that prevented actual Iurchik unity.[48]

In addition, according to Kozlov, Safarov and his men had minimal political talent. For example, the idea that a political movement would need a political program had never occurred to them. They thought that claiming to fight for the happiness of the people was enough. When such a program finally appeared, it was largely written by Spetsnaz GRU.[49] Even its name—the Popular Front of Tajikistan—was suggested by Oleg Golybin.

In many ways, the Russian and Uzbek military involvement in the civil war in Tajikistan is an extreme example of the military confusion during the early post-Soviet years. SzGRU units that only yesterday trained and fought together were now suddenly representing two different countries in the same war. Furthermore, officers on the ground made not only military but also political decisions. As for Uzbek authorities, they largely accepted what the spetsnaz forces did both politically and militarily. In Russia, however, there was genuine political disagreement between Moscow and the in-theater spetsnaz forces. In the end, the latter did what they thought was in Russia's best

interests even if that occasionally involved deceiving Russian leaders. Trust between the military and the political leadership in Moscow was still at a low, and it would get only worse when the Kremlin entered yet another armed conflict on post-Soviet territory in December 1994.

THE FIRST CHECHEN WAR

In September 1991, taking advantage of the fall of the Soviet Union, a group of Chechen nationalists took control over most state institutions in the North Caucasian republic of Chechnya inside Russia. They were under the leadership of a vain and emotionally erratic former Soviet air force general, Dzhokhar Dudaev. On 2 November, the coup-makers declared full independence from Russia. Surprised and uncertain about what to do, Moscow spent the next three years shifting between procrastination and occasional attempts at negotiations. The latter were interspersed with threats. In the end, however, the Kremlin found the situation untenable. They decided there was a need for firmer action. First, Russian leaders tried to win back control indirectly by providing military support to Chechens in opposition to Dudayev. Initially, this support was limited to weapons transfers, but soon the efforts expanded to military advisers, helicopters flown by Russian pilots, and finally tanks and APCs operated by Russian soldiers. None of this, however, was enough to seriously threaten the power of Dudaev.

During this first phase, operations were largely the responsibility of the domestic arm of the former KGB—now called the Federalnaia Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki (FSK, the Federal Service of Counterintelligence). In 1995, this service was renamed Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (FSB, or Federal Security Service, its current designation). According to Russian law, the military could not be used for domestic combat operations unless a state of emergency was

declared.[50] After the loss of Vympel in the aftermath of the 1993 constitutional crisis, however, the FSK was very short on in-house armed capacities. Only a small number of Alpha remained. The service was painfully aware of the problem. Furthermore, for the purpose of Chechnya, they knew that there was no time for them to build new capacities from scratch. Thus, they decided to secretly tap into the country's military resources. The plan was to organize an armed seizure of the Chechen capital. To the outside world, however, this operation would look like an internal Chechen coup. The main force would be a group of about 80 secretly recruited in-service Russian military, mostly tank crews, dressed up as locals.[51]

In addition to the cavalry, spetsnaz also played an important role in these plans. Sergei Kozlov remembers that in early autumn 1994 he was approached by some former colleagues. They wanted to recruit him to a secret FSK-led unit of about 40 former Spetsnaz GRU. These would assist the undercover military tank crews. The unit, in a partial repeat of the Shtorm-333 operation to kill the Afghan president in 1979, would attack Dudaev's palace with Shmel rocket-assisted flamethrowers. They would initiate their attack at the same time as the above-mentioned disguised Russian military tank crews and Chechen opposition fighters moved into the city on 40 main battle tanks. The former Spetsnaz GRU operators were promised US$1,000 each if they agreed to take part. Kozlov himself declined the offer, but others agreed and operational preparations started. Under FSK leadership, the men trained at a military base just outside Moscow. Although it was an FSK operation, a Spetsnaz GRU sergeant would lead the group inside Chechnya.[52] On 26 November, the spetsnaz forces were in place and opened fire on Dudaev's palace with the Shmels. The attempted simultaneous tank attack, however, was a total failure. Several vehicles lost their way, and Dudaev's forces easily stopped the rest. By evening, it was clear that the whole operation had been a fiasco. All the spetsnaz operators could do was retreat. On the

way back, they evacuated the crew from one of the few tanks that had made it to the palace. These disguised Russian military were escorted safely back to Russian territory.[53]

After this failure, Russia abandoned the indirect approach. On 11 December 1994, the Kremlin initiated a full-scale military invasion of the small republic. The Russian armed forces deployed massively, even though no state of emergency had been declared. Despair, and a sense of great urgency after the humiliating failure of the attempt on Dudaev's palace, were probably the main drivers. In fact, preparation was so poor and time so restricted that the first officer asked to lead the operation, General Eduard Vorobev, flat refused. He said he would not go to war with no plan and no time to prepare.[54]

When the actual war started, Spetsnaz GRU took over for Spetsnaz FSB as the dominating SOF force in the theater. Alpha still participated in a few operations, but the types of missions they completed must have been degrading for a unit that used to see itself as the best of the best. They initially acted as bodyguards for senior commanders such as Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and Minister of the Interior Viktor Erin. Later, they served as guards for especially important objects such as government buildings under Russian control. What remained of Vympel was not returned to the FSB from the MVD until August 1995.[55] Thus, they did not play any significant role in the fighting in the North Caucasus until the Second Chechen War.

The ensuing war took place in two phases. First, three months was necessary to get control over the Chechen capital. Second, after the fall of Grozny, the fighting gradually shifted from the Chechen plains to the southern mountains. This shift also meant that the character of the war changed. In Grozny, it was largely an urban conventional force-on-force conflict. In the mountains, it changed into a counterinsurgency. However, even after 10 years in Afghanistan this kind of warfare had not entered Soviet and later Russian training manuals. Spetsnaz GRU officer Taras Zikov remembers that before

going to Chechnya he had never come across a single training course or military textbook that explained how to fight a counterinsurgency.[56]

Between 15 and 20 Spetsnaz GRU units from all Russian military districts, mostly of company strength, took part in the fighting.[57] This included, for the first time ever, two volunteer units from naval spetsnaz. The latter filled the role as reconnaissance and strike units for two Naval Infantry brigades (from the Baltic Fleet and the Pacific Fleet) that took part in the fighting.

Russian after-combat analyses have identified at least two major problems with the deployment of Spetsnaz GRU during the First Chechen War. The first was their use or misuse as elite infantry. The second was their lack of autonomy in terms of mobility. Both were repetitions of what had happened in Afghanistan, although autonomy in terms of mobility had improved in the second part of that latter war.

Filling in as elite infantry is a predicament occasionally experienced by many SOF around the world. For example, the British SAS complained they had to do this during the Falklands War.[58] The problem is normally not that they do the job badly. Instead, it is that they cannot at the same time carry out the strategically significant missions for which they are trained and that potentially would have contributed significantly more to the overall war effort. In terms of the First Chechen War, it may of course have been the case that Russian military leaders thought they had little need for strategic SOF missions. Robert Seely has argued that the Russian military and political leaders initially were deeply convinced that a show of force alone would be enough to get Dudaev to give up Chechen independence.[59] This belief in victory by deterrence is very similar to the thinking at the beginning of the invasion of Afghanistan, and also to the idea that as soon as the Russian military started to demonstrate their willingness to use force in Ukraine in 2022, the willingness to resist in that country would crumble.

In Chechnya, Spetsnaz GRU continued to be used in missions for which they were not trained after the deterrence strategy had failed. This probably happened because some commanders wanted to avoid casualties among their troops, and also because of a catastrophic lack of functioning tactical reconnaissance units in the army.

An anonymous Spetsnaz GRU source, claiming firsthand experience, has argued that several army commanders would send spetsnaz troops to perform the most dangerous missions. This took place independently of whether or not they were trained for those missions. The commanders saw this as the easiest way to save the lives of the soldiers of their own units.[60]

In terms of the lack of tactical reconnaissance units, the 2012 semiofficial history of GRU, *Voennaia Razvedka Rossii*, acknowledges that army intelligence throughout the 1990s and well into the 2000s was in a sorry state. According to this source, the tactical intelligence detachments of mobilization units could often muster no more than 5 percent of their stated strength. Even the intelligence detachments of the few standing units rarely could muster more than 25 to 30 percent.[61] Thus, in essence, the army would have been blind without Spetsnaz GRU.

In addition, army reconnaissance was not the only thing that was in shambles. A further problem was that few regular infantry units were able to conduct the storming operations necessary to take Grozny. When SzGRU Colonel Vladimir Nedobezhkin tried to argue with the commander of the 20th Division, to whom he had been subordinated, that the tasks his men were set to do were not part of Spetsnaz GRU preparation, the commander told him "at least you have officers with experience and fighters that are trained."[62] The storm-troop function had never been part of Spetsnaz GRU training, but the low morale and training standards of the regular forces—both standing and mobilized units—meant that assistance from the better-skilled and more thoroughly vetted spetsnaz troops was necessary in these operations.

This spear-point role, in particular, led to exceptionally heavy Spetsnaz GRU losses during this war. The year 1995 was at that time, in terms of causalities, the worst in Spetsnaz GRU history.[63] Thus, if the war in Afghanistan is the time of fame in the operational history of Spetsnaz GRU, then the First Chechen War is the one everyone would like to forget.

In addition to the problems of morale and training, it was also the case that the Soviet Union never developed light infantry units of the kind that would have been suited for taking a city such as Grozny. This was so despite the fact that the Soviet army historically had significant experience with urban battle. Thus, when the regular and heavy motorized infantry units lost their maneuverability due to the narrow spaces and fierce opposition in the Chechen capital, any kinds of units that were able to operate at some distance from their armored vehicles became very important. VDV, border troops, Naval Infantry, and especially Spetsnaz GRU fell into this category.[64]

This use of spetsnaz troops also predictably led to their subordination to commanders who had never before had SOF at their disposal. They had a minimal understanding of what to do with them. As an illustration, when Spetsnaz GRU officer V. Dmitriev and his group were subordinated to the 276th Motor Rifle Regiment, one of the commanding officers of this regiment thought spetsnaz operators had been trained mostly to run around from building to building killing enemies with a knife.[65] Undoubtedly, the legacy of secrecy around Spetsnaz GRU contributed considerably to this state of affairs.

Most of these problems are well illustrated in the case of the 370th Detachment (*otryad*) from the 16th SzGRU Brigade out of Chuchkovo. The argumentative but also inventive and effective Evgenii Sergeev, who had captured the first Stinger missile in Afghanistan, led the unit. When he received the order to go to Chechnya, Sergeev had recently been passed over for a spot at the academy. Thus, he was not in a good mood. The omission would undoubtedly have serious negative

consequences for his career. He grumbled that, in terms of academic study and promotion in rank, the GRU always seemed to find him too light. When there was a hotspot somewhere that needed taking care of, however, he was the first on their list.[66]

The main reason for Sergeev's continuing troubles was an incident back in Afghanistan in 1985. Here, he had served vodka to some Afghan commanders in an effort to mend relations after a serious falling-out between Soviet and Afghan troops. Upon his return to camp, the chief political officer accosted him. "Why is the captain smelling of alcohol? Is he not aware we are engaged in a battle for sobriety?" The year 1985 was the peak of Gorbachev's campaign against alcoholism in the Soviet Union. The political officer reported Sergeev, and the latter received an official reprimand from the Communist Party. After this, further promotions were most likely out of the question. Upon returning to the Soviet Union, however, he was given a second chance. If he was willing to ask forgiveness for having committed the crime of serving alcohol to allied troops, the military might show leniency. Sergeev, however, was adamant that he had done the right thing at the time. He refused to seek a pardon. In this way, his stubbornness and independence of mind became an obstacle for career promotion that he dragged with him also into the post-Soviet period. This fact notwithstanding, his reputation as a combat officer did not take damage. The name "Sergeev" regularly came up when something operationally challenging had to be taken care of. Now, he was asked to take the 370th into Chechnya.

The unit arrived in Mozdok in North Ossetia just northwest of the Chechen border in January 1995. This city was, because of the large local air base, the main staging ground for the Russian forces going into Chechnya. Sergeev, however, could not believe his own ears when he was given only five hours to have his unit ready for departure to Chechnya after their arrival in Mozdok. This time included taking over and familiarizing themselves with a set of BTRs. True, in this case, the non-spetsnaz drivers and machine-gunners remained, but that

was of little help when these soldiers themselves had close to zero experience with the vehicles. When Sergeev asked one of them how far he had actually driven a BTR, he said three kilometers. The gunner on the same vehicle had fired his PKT tank-mounted machine gun only once before and the KPVT heavy machine gun not at all. Nonetheless, at 1 p.m. the 370th started their trek toward Grozny. With inexperienced drivers and a demand from headquarters to keep a speed of close to the BTR maximum of 70–80 kilometers per hour, Sergeev's vehicles started breaking down right and left. Still, one way or another they eventually made it to Grozny.

They entered the city from the west, and stopped in the rear area of Task Force West. This grouping was under the leadership of General Ivan Babichev. According to Sergeev, "inconceivable chaos and confusion" ruled.[67] Upon their arrival nobody was expecting them, and nobody had given any thought as to how they might be used. The VDV officer in charge of reconnaissance for Task Force West seemed to have absolutely no idea what Spetsnaz GRU was. He suggested that Sergeev's men just stroll the streets of the city noting or drawing on paper whatever information they might find interesting.[68] The officer showed genuine surprise when he learned that spetsnaz forces could deploy small teams to the rear areas of the enemy to stay there for days and gather much more important intelligence. However, neither this officer nor any other took Sergeev up on his offer to do that. Instead, the first Spetsnaz GRU mission in Task Force West became to clear buildings of Chechen fighters before the gradual advance of the 19th Motor Rifle Division into the city.

In fact, reconnaissance immediately ahead of advancing infantry became one of the most typical Spetsnaz GRU missions during this phase of the war. In addition, they would also find targets for artillery and help directing the fire. Again, these were tasks for which the men had never trained. According to SzGRU commander Evgenii Ivanov, no matter how much experience his men got in directing artillery fire,

they almost never reached the skill level of professional forward artillery observers. Ivanov found that results consistently got better if the spetsnaz forces brought these specialists with them instead of replacing them. In this way, they could protect the artillery observers from danger while the latter did their job.[69] Such protection was absolutely crucial, because the artillery observers had no idea of how to do this themselves. They very often lost their lives to the opponent's snipers.[70] Such embedded forward artillery observers, however, became more of a problem when the fighting shifted to the mountains. Many of these just could not cope physically with the extremely demanding terrain and would slow down the rest of the forces.[71]

Artillery played a decisive role in this war. In particular, that was the case in the fall of Grozny. In the words of a Western eyewitness, "rather than storming the Chechen positions, the Russian forces literally blasted the Chechen fighters out of them."[72]

A preliminary Russian victory was achieved when the Chechen defenders abandoned the Chechen presidential headquarters on 19 January 1995. Two of Sergeev's subunits as well as a unit from the 45th SzVDV Regiment were the first to enter Dudaev's palace after the Chechens left. They now hoisted the Russian flag over the building. On Russian TV, however, the story was that the takeover had been the work of Naval Infantry. Sergeev muttered, "Some of the marines were even declared Heroes of Russia because of this. As always, they would forget about Spetsnaz."[73]

The most tragic incident for the 370th took place a few days later, on 24 January 1995. The unit was preparing the safe relocation of a Naval Infantry battalion to the Chernoreche District in the southwestern part of Grozny. Relations between the commander of this battalion and Sergeev had not started well. The former demanded absolute guarantees for the security of his soldiers in the midst of an intense urban battle. He threatened Sergeev that "if only one strand of hair falls off the scalp of one of my soldiers, I will have you

decapitated."[74] Sergeev led all the marines safely to their new location, but after returning to base his own unit suffered one of the most serious losses of any Spetsnaz GRU unit during combat until the full-scale war with Ukraine in 2022. He had just left a meeting with some subordinate officers when he could feel the ground shaking under his feet. The next thing he knew, he was lying under a large piece of rubble on which people were running back and forth. He was able to get someone to drag him out, but then he lost consciousness. Later, waking up in hospital, he learned that 48 of his men had lost their lives in an explosion. A significant part of the three-story building they used as their base was in ruins. Both the operational leadership and parts of the Russian press quickly put the blame on Sergeev. Some suggested his men had not cleared the building for booby traps before settling in, others that explosives they brought with them had been handled haphazardly. Sergeev himself took no blame. He insisted that the reason for the catastrophe was a Russian artillery shell going astray. It was no secret that this happened repeatedly throughout the conflict. The final reason was never established, but the 16th SzGRU Brigade has ever since observed 24 January as a day in honor of the dead.

The second Spetsnaz GRU predicament was the lack of autonomy in mobility. Even though Afghanistan had clearly demonstrated that spetsnaz troops needed their own BTRs, at least when they fought as light infantry, these vehicles were taken away from the brigades as soon as that previous war was over. Nobody seems to have thought that some of these means of transport could have remained with the units, at least for training. It appeared out of the question that Spetsnaz GRU would ever again fight in a fashion similar to that in Afghanistan. Spetsnaz commander Taras Zikov remembers that, when his unit nevertheless was issued BTR-80s in Chechnya, divisional headquarters suddenly decided that the dedicated drivers and machine-gunners who had come with them were needed elsewhere. Thus, given

the absence of any training on these vehicles themselves, all that the men could do was "sit down and open the instruction manuals."[75]

Throughout both wars in Chechnya, Spetsnaz GRU got access to BTRs on an operation-by-operation basis. This meant that many operations took place without motorized transport even when it would have been very helpful. Often, spetsnaz commanders would have to lobby for BTRs. According to one former Spetsnaz GRU officer, their constant "nagging" for these vehicles did little to improve relations between them and the rest of the forces.[76]

The helicopter situation was no better. In fact, because the Russian helicopter reserves had been exhausted in Afghanistan and not replaced (Russia purchased little or no new military equipment from 1991 to the mid-2000s), the scarcity of this resource was felt even more bitterly in Chechnya than it had been in Afghanistan.[77] Furthermore, as with the BTRs, the dedicated SzGRU helicopter units had been abandoned immediately after the war in Afghanistan. Once again, helicopter support would often depend on personal contacts between Spetsnaz GRU officers and helicopter pilots. Finally, the pilots had little training in general and for the more extreme flying skills necessary for transporting spetsnaz troops in mountainous terrain in particular.[78] Most likely, the aversion to losses of expensive equipment during peacetime training again was to blame. An anonymous former SzGRU brigade commander has estimated that all SzGRU troops serving in Chechnya combined had access to fewer helicopters than just one SzGRU unit had in Afghanistan.[79]

All these problems and deployment of Spetsnaz GRU for non-SOF missions, however, do not mean that there were no examples of efficient and SOF-specific use of these forces. Military analyst Mikhail Khodarenok argues that Spetsnaz GRU were seen, as in Afghanistan, by the majority of experts and observers as by far the most efficient type of force deployed to Chechnya.[80] At times, they also engaged in more typical SOF missions. To give but one example: at the same time

as the major attack on Grozny was launched on 31 December 1994, a small group of four spetsnaz officers together with a mix of 17 spetsnaz warrant officers and contract soldiers were inserted by helicopter into the village of Serzhen-Yurt. This settlement was located in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. From there, spetsnaz operators under heavy snowfall completed a 26-hour march across the mountains. Their backpacks were 20–30 kilograms laden with arms, ammunition, and demolition equipment. They established base close to where human intelligence and aerial photographs had identified a Chechen separatist training camp. During several attacks against this camp, about 60 Chechen fighters were killed. Furthermore, Russian aviation over the next two days destroyed 14 Chechen armored vehicles of various categories based on directions from this spetsnaz group. The group itself suffered zero casualties.[81]

It is also worth noting that the newly formed 45th Spetsnaz Regiment of the VDV had their baptism of fire in the First Chechen War. In the same way as Spetsnaz GRU, they were forced to become more of a reconnaissance-in-force unit than a SOF unit. They gathered mostly operational and tactical intelligence and took part in force-on-force battle.

Unburdened by the institutional legacies of either Spetsnaz GRU or Spetsnaz KGB, the 45th also seems to have been more open to experimenting with capabilities not normally associated with Soviet SOF. Chechnya gave them an opportunity to try things out. For example, the 45th seems to have been the first in the Russian military ever to use unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in combat. In April 1995, they brought to Chechnya five units of the Pchela (Bee) surveillance UAV as well as engineers from the manufacturer. In good weather, this device was able to give commanders an overview of the terrain 40–50 kilometers in the distance even in mountains. That was indeed useful, but the use of the Pchela remained only an experiment. For Russia, this was the financially difficult 1990s. Arms procurement was close to zero, and most production units had big financial troubles.

The Smolensk Aircraft Plant that manufactured the Pchelas was among them. The enterprise soon stopped its production of Pchelas for financial reasons.[82]

In another unconventional move, the 45th in Chechnya included a 50-man psychological warfare unit. These psyops operators even brought with them their own mobile printing press. However, according to head of intelligence for the VDV from 1990 to 1997 and "father" of the 45th, Colonel Pavel Popovskikh, the material the unit produced was very low quality. Their services were soon discarded.[83]

By May 1995, a combination of Russian quantitative superiority and improved fighting had put the Chechens on the defensive. In a final desperate attempt to change the situation, the Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev on 14 June organized a raid on the civilian hospital in the city of Budennovsk just north of the Chechen border. Russian forces made two unsuccessful attempts to retake control of the hospital by force. Because of this fighting, at least 140 hostages were killed and more than 400 wounded.[84] To end the carnage, Russian leadership agreed to an immediate cease-fire in all of Chechnya. After this, a truce, interrupted only by occasional clashes between Russian and Chechen forces, existed from June to December 1995. This break gave the Chechens the breathing space they needed to recover their forces. In December, they renewed large-scale fighting in yet another effort to push out the Russians. This time, the fighting lasted until April 1996, when a missile from a Russian fighter aircraft killed Dudaev by homing in on his Inmarsat satellite phone. Dudaev's death did not immediately end the fighting, but neither side was now able to get the upper hand. Finally, in August 1996, the two sides signed a peace agreement in the Chechen city of Khasaviurt. The agreement ended hostilities, but it only postponed a final resolution of the issue of Chechen independence. That decision was now deferred until 2001—but things would heat up again before that.

THE SECOND CHECHEN WAR

This war started as a Russian response to four bombings, and one attempted bombing, of city blocks in several Russian cities in September 1999, as well as to an incursion by Chechen radical Islamists into Chechnya's neighboring Republic of Dagestan in August 1999. Russian authorities blamed Chechen terrorists for the bombings. Later, speculations abounded about whether Putin and the FSB themselves were behind these incidents to create a pretext for the Second Chechen War. Putin, at this time serving as prime minister and not yet president, was entangled in a power struggle with the mayor of Moscow, Iurii Luzhkov, and the recently departed prime minister, Evgenii Primakov. A short, victorious war in Chechnya could give him an edge in this conflict and secure his candidacy for the top job. It would portray him as the man who could rectify the national humiliation of the first war and the resulting Khasavyurt Accords. Despite investigations and speculations, however, no irrefutable evidence of foul play by Putin seems so far to have been found. If it was the Chechens who were behind the bombings, their motive may have been to scare Putin from starting a second war.

Be that as it may, operationally the new war largely followed the blueprints of the first. Russian forces crossed the border on 1 October 1999. In the first phase, from October 1999 to March 2000, they fought force-on-force clashes with Chechens in fixed battles for control of the major Chechen cities. This included a second battle for the capital, Grozny. When that city fell, the Chechens, as in the first war, withdrew to the mountains. From there, they conducted raids on Russian troops in the mountains and on the plains. Combat in the mountains had started while Grozny was still under siege, but it gradually became the main form of warfare.[85]

In time, this shift of combat from the plains to the mountains led to the formation of the special Mountains Grouping as part of the lead

military unit in the invasion, the 42nd Motor Rifle Division. For the larger part of the war, Spetsnaz GRU belonged to the Mountains Grouping and was responsible for much of its fighting.[86] The Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, later went as far as stating that in the second phase of the war spetsnaz forces may have done as much as 80 percent of the fighting.[87] According to one of the SzGRU officers who took part in this fighting, however, 80 percent may have been an overstatement, but he is certain that his organization conducted at least half of all combat operations.[88] Although organization and training, as well as the system of deployment, had improved since the previous war, losses among spetsnaz forces remained high. During the intense first phase, some units lost as many as 30 percent of their troops in the course of one rotation. This figure decreased to about 10 percent for each six-month rotation once the fighting shifted to the mountains. For every SzGRU officer killed, there would be approximately five dead privates.[89]

As in 1994, the SOF entered the Second Chechen War together with and not ahead of the rest of the military. This time, however, they stayed on long after the others were gone. The war did not officially end until April 2009, but it gradually became less and less intense. The decreasing pace of combat led both Spetsnaz GRU and Spetsnaz FSB to stop stationing units permanently in Chechnya. Gradually, they would shift to sending operators and detachments from other places in Russia to Chechnya only for specific missions.[90] This change in the character of the fighting fit with the local concentration of power in the hands of Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov's gradual establishment of dictatorship in Chechnya made possible the increasingly repressive policies that were the main reason behind the quelling of Islamist violence. Still, it took until January 2021, and the killing of the last major Chechen Islamist leader, Aslan Biutukaev, before Kadyrov with some justification could declare the end to radical Islamic military resistance in his republic.[91]

The general verdict among analysts and commentators alike has been that the Russian armed forces did significantly better in the second war than they had done in the first.[92] In particular, they were able to take Grozny and the other urban centers with fewer causalities, both military and civilian. They were also better at holding what they had captured. There was probably considerable learning from the first war, but in addition the enemy had changed. This time around the Chechens fought more like a lightly armed insurgency. In contrast to the first war, there was now very little armor and artillery on the Chechen side.[93] Nevertheless, some have argued that these improvements should not be exaggerated.[94] Taking both the positive and the critical assessments into account, one may roughly state that in terms of the second war and spetsnaz forces: (1) Problems related to the gathering of intelligence and autonomy of mobility remained from previous wars; (2) interagency cooperation was improved, at least organizationally, but still left much to be desired; and (3) the military assistance policy of training pro-Russian Chechens to do part of the fighting (so-called Chechenization) was a big success.

The gathering of intelligence continued to be a major challenge in this war. Colonel Mikhail Khodarenok served in the operational department of the General Staff from 1992 to 2000. He argues that intelligence, as it had been in Afghanistan, was "the most fundamental problem" in both Chechen wars.[95] GRU complained after the war that they had done their job and produced valuable intelligence but that it was ignored by operational leadership.[96] This concerned the whole process from collection and analysis to dissemination and use. As an example, three days before the main body of Russian forces entered the center of Grozny, the operational command initiated the so-called Night of the Jackal. This was a gigantic air and artillery bombardment of the city to prepare the way for ground troops. SzGRU Colonel Aleksandr Musienko was in 1999 leading a separate SzGRU unit consisting only of officers. This was the Musienko who had taken part

in the famous Krer operation in Afghanistan and who had helped Kvachkov organize the Popular Front in Tajikistan. The unit's main job was to take part in the manhunt for Chechen commanders, but they also gathered intelligence. In relation to the Night of the Jackal, Musienko is adamant that spetsnaz commanders persistently had reported to the operational command that the whole thing was unnecessary. According to their intelligence, almost all Chechen fighters had already left the city. However, this intelligence was completely discarded. Bombs and artillery shells rained on a city that was now more or less empty of fighters but still contained a significant number of civilians.[97]

The continuing problems with intelligence had roots in organizational culture and army structural deficiencies. Culturally, the main problem was the risk associated with bringing bad news. The proclivity for shooting the messenger is known in Russia at least since Tsarist times. According to former General Staff officer Khodarenok, an officer in the Russian armed forces is often "beaten" more for a true but negative report than for a false but optimistic one. In these circumstances, learning how to avoid unpleasant questions or to lie with a straight face becomes a necessity. Thus, skewed intelligence estimates "became one of the main reasons for faulty decision making" during this war.[98] On the structural side, the main problem was the continuing lack of functioning army intelligence units. According to Sergei Kozlov: "No army unit commander would move his men forward until he had the go-ahead from a spetsnaz commander," thus often preventing the latter from doing the jobs they were meant to do.[99]

The problem of Spetsnaz GRU's independence of mobility also remained, at least in terms of access to helicopters. According to Major Dmitrii Chartorizhskii, the Russian armed forces did not receive even one new helicopter from 1996 to 2004.[100] Furthermore, according to estimates made by Mark Kramer, the Chechens were able to down

more than 65 percent of the Russian helicopters present in the theater of operations in the first three years of the second war.[101] True, some of these were replaced by helicopters from nearby bases, but the shortage was nevertheless a major problem. Spetsnaz commanders still needed to beg others for their use. This meant that they often could not go to where they were needed. In June 2004, even the government newspaper *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* lamented the problem. Their main military commentator rhetorically asked: "Why have rebels been able to occupy Nazran six times?" (Nazran is the capital of Chechnya's neighboring Republic of Ingushetia.) His answer was simple: "The spetsnaz do not have regular access to helicopters."[102]

Since Spetsnaz FSB had played only a minor role in the first war, little in terms of cooperation had developed between them and Spetsnaz GRU. That, however, was different during the second campaign. Alpha and Vympel were present on the ground in Chechnya already by August 1999.[103] This was because, among other reasons, the operations involved assignments the military was not allowed to handle. Since the legal basis for the presence of the Russian Armed Forces in Chechnya was flimsy at best, restrictions were put on what kinds of operations they could partake in.[104] For example, all military units were in principle barred from entering Chechen villages. Direct encounters with Chechen civilians were the prerogative and responsibility of the MVD or the FSB. Absent troops from these agencies, Spetsnaz GRU were allowed to isolate the villages. There were probably breaches to these rules, but they still restricted what military troops could do. In addition, Spetsnaz FSB had the main responsibility for manhunts.[105] The results, however, at least among the top echelons of the Chechen insurgency, were meager. The only top-level Chechen commander who was caught alive and sentenced was Salman Raduev. He was captured during morning prayer by an Alpha team in the village of Novogroznenskii in March 2000.

According to Evgenii Norin, a historian of the Chechen wars, the whole operation was over in 20 seconds.[106]

Moreover, because of their training, Alpha was the main agency for dealing with hostage rescue. However, there was no problem if Spetsnaz FSB engaged in typical military roles. For example, both Alpha and Vympel deployed snipers, and Vympel also directed artillery fire and guided close air support.[107] In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Dmitrii Razumovskii, a mountain warfare expert from Vympel, became something of an authority on artillery fire and close air support.[108]

Parallel fighting between Spetsnaz GRU and Spetsnaz FSB, however, was now to be avoided. A joint command for all agencies, the Interagency Task Force (ITF), was established. As far as special operations were concerned, the ITF had a deputy commander dedicated especially to these forces.[109] For the first year of the war, this organization was headed by the military. In January 2001, the FSB took over. This shift in responsibility symbolized that Moscow no longer saw the conflict mainly as a military problem. Finally, in July 2003, responsibility shifted again, this time to the MVD. The FSB was by now busy building up the Kadyrov administration, and they had never been comfortable in the role of leading kinetic operations anyway.

This integration of forces also meant that spetsnaz operators from different agencies for the first time in their history formed joint groupings. This happened in the way that relevant capacities from the FSB and the MVD temporarily relocated to the bases of the different Spetsnaz GRU detachments. Thus, for example, the 33rd SzGRU Detachment, located near the village of Engenoi close to the border with Dagestan, was reinforced with groups from the OMON (Otriad Mobilnyi Osobogo Naznachenia—Special Purpose Mobile Unit) and SOBR units (Spetsialnyi Otriad Bystrogo Reagirovania) of the MVD as well as GUIN (Russian prison police) from the Ministry of Justice and

operatives from FSB's Vympel. SOBR were police Special Forces or SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams, OMON were riot police, and GUIN were units under the Ministry of Justice trained to handle prison uprisings and other violent incidents that might take place within the Russian penitentiary system. In other cases, companies from the VDV would be attached. In addition to all of this, the Russian Border Troops (subordinate to the FSB) also had a special operations unit, Sigma, operating in Chechnya.[110]

Spetsnaz GRU and Spetsnaz FSB not only collocated; they also fought together. This took place through the formation of *svodnye otryady* (combined detachments). For example, in May 2000 SzGRU Lieutenant Colonel Sinitsyn attacked a Chechen rebel base with a detachment consisting of 27 Spetsnaz GRU and 17 Vympel.[111] Some argue that these detachments increased combat efficiency.[112] Others, however, offer a more mixed assessment.[113] For example, even when fighting together, they were not fully under the same command. When the deputy commander in charge of special operations at the ITF had given a detachment a collective order, each agency still demanded that "their" troops in the theater clarified *their* operations with *their* superiors in Moscow before engaging.[114] Often, for example, orders from army commanders to MVD commanders would simply be ignored if the MVD leadership back in Moscow did not like them. This took place even if they belonged to the same combined detachment.[115] Thus, setting up the ITF did not overcome all the problems associated with a plurality of agencies fighting the same war.

Furthermore, there were also this time around more or less no doctrinal documents directing *how* to fight what the country's political leadership called an "antiterrorist" operation. This meant that, even if there was now a higher degree of organizational unity, there was still no joint doctrinal understanding of how to conduct the fight. Commanders at every level would make decisions based mostly on the

cultures, norms, and procedures of their own agency.[116] Consequently, there was a lot of incomprehension in terms of how "the others" fought and a strong tendency to discredit the efforts of others. The views expressed by army General Gennadii Troshev serve as a classic example. In April 2000, Troshev was appointed commander of the joint group of forces in the North Caucasus. In his recounting of the war, he largely echoed General Gromov's assessment of how the KGB had damaged their own reputation in Afghanistan. Troshev lamented that due to "Chekist" exceptional inabilities "the army had to save these other agencies in almost all critical situations."[117]

Finally, potential synergies of jointness were not the only reason why combined detachments were created. Sometimes, they were put together in a hurry just to avoid leaks of intelligence.[118] As in Afghanistan, leaking information to the enemy was in Chechnya almost as big a problem as finding information.[119] Commanders, operating on the assumption that any agency would take secrecy more seriously if their own people would be party to the operation, sometimes created combined detachments exclusively for this reason. The problem in many cases was that units had no time to train together and get to know each other before they went into combat.

The Chechenization of the conflict was the most important difference from the first war. Some have argued that this was the main reason why Russia did better the second time around.[120] Politically, President Putin Chechenizized the conflict by appointing Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov as acting head of the Chechen administration in July 2000. Kadyrov had been on the separatist side in the first war but went over to the Russians in autumn 1999. Militarily, the process took the form of two to three ethnic Chechen SOF battalions under the command of Spetsnaz GRU. Sergei Kozlov argues that the need for indigenous forces had been recognized already in the aftermath of the first war. Thus, efforts to create such forces started even before the main Russian invasion in 1999.[121] In addition to Spetsnaz GRU, the

FSB and the MVD also established their own ethnic Chechen structures. For Spetsnaz GRU, this was the first time after Tajikistan that they engaged in the type of military assistance missions that had long been the mainstay of the operations for many Western SOF.

The first ethnic Chechen SzGRU unit, Zapad (West), was established as a company in October 1999. It was under the leadership of Said-Magomed Kakiev. For the first month of the war, Zapad fought as an independent partisan unit. In November, however, the Russian military decided to make them a regular military unit under their command. That also implied increasing their supplies of arms and ammunition.[122] Zapad at first consisted of only 29 Chechen fighters. It was designated "West" because it originated from the Nadterechnyi District in the northwestern part of Chechnya. Much of the population in this area belongs to the Naqshbandi brotherhood of Sufi Islam. The Naqshbandi had been more positive toward collaboration with the Russians than most other Chechens all the way back to the 1870s. A historical precursor to Zapad could be found in the so-called Savage division of North Caucasian Muslims that fought for Russia during World War I.[123] In contrast to their sibling, the later-established Vostok (East) Battalion, Zapad never contained fighters that had fought against the Russians in the First Chechen War. Spetsnaz GRU officers later came to see Kakiev's group as the most militarily efficient among the pro-Russian Chechen formations.[124]

Kakiev had been an ardent enemy of Dudaev's leadership and Chechen separatism from the beginning. In 1993, he played the main role in a failed attempt on Dudaev's life. According to Kakiev himself, he had received a direct order from Allah to assassinate the Chechen leader. The plan had been to attack Dudaev with RPG-2 grenades during one of the many rallies that were held in the president's honor in central Grozny. The assassination team, however, was unable to acquire original grenades for the RPG. Thus, they decided to make their own. The result was that when Kakiev pulled the trigger the

launcher blew up in his face. The explosion tore off his left arm as well as an eye and his nose and caused several injuries to his skull. In fact, the blast was so strong that it killed the man standing next to him.[125] This incapacitating incident, however, in no way diminished the former truck driver's appetite for battle.

Kakiev had also recruited likeminded people among the Naqshbandi to help the Russians in the first war. At that time, the FSB (the FSK at this time) had taken him under their patronage. That early attempt at Chechenization, however, seems not to have been part of any strategy or even been taken very seriously by the Russians.[126] As soon as the fighting was over, the unit was abandoned.

The Vostok (East) Battalion was not formed until March 2002, two and a half years after Zapad. From the beginning, this unit was under the leadership of the influential Yamadaev family. These kinfolk came from the eastern Chechen city of Gudermes. The Yamadaevs had been central in the battle against Russian forces in the first war. However, during the interwar years, they became more and more opposed to the growing influence of foreign radical Islamic militants. Since the beginning of 1999, they no longer were under President Aslan Maskhadov's control. In August 1999, the Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev and the Jordanian radical Islamist Ibn-al-Khattab entered Dagestan with 1,400 men. They went to aid local Wahhabis in taking control of that republic. This action was the last straw for the Yamadaevs. As soon as Russian forces entered Chechnya, they voluntarily gave up Gudermes to the invaders. First, an ethnic Chechen SzGRU company was formed under the leadership of Dzhabril Yamadaev. Later, in March 2003, this company was expanded to battalion size under the leadership of Dzhabril's brother Sulim.

Both Zapad and Vostok were formally subordinated to the 42nd GMD. Operationally, however, they were run directly by GRU. Unsurprisingly, the "curator" of the Chechen battalions was the now slightly legendary Aleksandr Musienko.[127] His experience from

Tajikistan and the Popular Front obviously came in handy. The commander of the 42nd GMD was responsible only for equipping them. According to Sulim Yamadaev, this commander was extremely worried that giving arms and ammunition to fighters of such ill repute as the Yamadaevs would somehow backfire on him personally. He told the Yamadaevs that, "as soon as you have what you need, make sure I never see, hear, or even come to think of you again."[128] While both battalions had ethnic Chechen commanders, each also included an unknown number of Russian staff officers to secure interoperability with the Russian forces.[129]

In terms of the war effort, the battalions were a huge success. A central feature of the counterinsurgency was mop-up operations in Chechen villages. These, as in all counterinsurgencies, were conducted to separate fighters from noncombatants. A main problem, however, was that these mop-ups had a strong tendency to create more new militants than they were able to uncover existing ones. In the aftermath of mop-ups, there was often an increase in the attacks on federal forces from fighters and aggrieved civilians. That result, however, was different when people of the same ethnicity as the civilians conducted the mop-ups. The provocative effect was significantly reduced. According to a thorough and careful study by Jason Lyall, the use of ethnic Chechens instead of ethnic Russians for mop-ups decreased the number of resulting attacks on federal forces by 40 percent.[130]

Not only was the civilian population more pacified by the fact that those who came into their homes were ethnic Chechens; these soldiers also handled themselves better than the Russians. At least one extrajudicial killing took place in 25 percent of the Russian operations. The same figure for the Chechen operations was 12 percent. Theft of civilian property was reported after 18 percent of the Russian mop-ups. This compared with only 3 percent after the Chechen mop-ups.[131] Furthermore, Lyall also demonstrates that, when Russians and

Chechens conducted these operations together, the results were the same as if the Russians had done it alone.[132] The ethnic effect is further compounded by the fact that mop-up operations conducted by the historically pro-Russian Zapad led to the same decrease in post–mop-up attacks as the mop-ups conducted by the recently pro-Russia converted Vostok.[133] The simple fact that Zapad consisted of ethnic Chechens was enough. The effect was not diluted by the fact that Naqshbandi Chechens had a reputation for being collaborators with the Russians.

In the end, however, Russia was not able to bet on several horses in Chechnya at the same time. They chose the chief mufti of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, as their preferred partner. When he was later assassinated, Akhmad's son Ramzan inherited the position as the Kremlin's local strongman. Ramzan would not accept armed ethnic Chechen formations on his territory that were not directly subordinated to himself. Vostok survived long enough to take part on the Russian side in the five-day war against Georgia in 2008, but in November of that year both Zapad and Vostok were declared disbanded. Ruslan and Sulim Yamadaev, both recipients of the Hero of Russia Order for their service in Vostok, were soon thereafter gunned down. Ruslan was killed in Moscow and Sulim in Dubai. Ramzan remains the main suspect in organizing both assassinations. In reality, however, the units were not so much disbanded as taken over by Ramzan. Under new leadership, they took part in warfare on the anti-Kiev side in the Russia-initiated warfare in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and they took part in operations in the Aleppo Province in Syria in 2016. To what extent they take orders from Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov on the one side and the GRU on the other is still something of a mystery.[134]

There is, finally, also some limited information of a Cossack unit established in late 1999 under the guidance of the 22nd SzGRU Brigade.[135] According to one source, the head of the Grozny branch of

the Terek Cossack Host, I. A. Albasov, approached the brigade's leadership with a proposal for setting up such a unit.[136] The unit initially consisted of no more than a handful of people who all identified as Cossacks. Again, the historical parallels are strong. By origin, the Cossacks were ethnic Slavs who escaped serfdom by establishing themselves as farmer-warriors on the borders of the Russian empire. Here, they lived a free life denied their farmer peers in the rest of the empire. In return, they guarded the borders of the state with their lives. Cossacks played an important role in the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the first part of the nineteenth century.

In the beginning of the year 2000, these "Cossack spetsnaz" fought as a separate unit. However, in March they combined with Chechen volunteers to conduct operations in Chechnya's mountains.[137] The unit gradually grew in numbers, and in May 2000 this Cossack–Chechen mix was organized into the 305th Spetsnaz GRU Detachment of the 22nd Brigade. They established headquarters in Khankala outside Grozny. The original plan seems to have been that the unit would partly take orders from the 22nd and partly operate on its own. The regular Russian officers in charge of organizing the 305th were in the beginning not allowed to accompany their subordinates into combat. As in both Angola and Afghanistan before, however, advising but not participating proved inefficient and morally uncomfortable. Gradually, Russian officers would fight together with the troops they were instructing. The brigade command ignored this breach of protocol as long as no major problems arose.[138] The unit existed until May 2001. By then, the Cossacks had had enough and gone home; the Chechens in the unit were given other assignments.

"MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES"

The expression "May you live in interesting times" is said to be of Chinese origin, and the events surrounding 1989 certainly qualified on this count. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism shook the foundations of all parts of Russian society, including the military and the special operations forces. Both Spetsnaz GRU and Spetsnaz FSB faced three challenges because of the regime change and the following decade of turbulence.

First, Alpha and Vympel became part of political power struggles at the top to a degree that had never happened to any Soviet or Russian SOF before. Nevertheless, despite tremendous political pressure, both services managed to navigate through these two constitutional crises without the blood of their compatriots on their hands. True, for Vympel this temporarily cost them their status as SOF.

Second, Spetsnaz GRU in the early 1990s for the first time in their history made strategic decisions on behalf of Russia. That happened during the civil war in Tajikistan. Here, spetsnaz officers on the ground went from making decisions in the absence of orders from Moscow to partly contravening such orders when they finally came. There is little doubt that Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov and several other spetsnaz officers on many occasions during this conflict thought they knew better than the politicians in Moscow what would be in the best interest of Russia.

Third, Spetsnaz GRU and Spetsnaz FSB twice fought a repetition of the Afghan war in Chechnya. It was a repetition because both campaigns developed into counterinsurgencies in mountainous terrain very similar to the one in Afghanistan. Both campaigns were fought with significantly fewer resources than in Afghanistan, with the same lack of training and doctrine for this kind of warfare. Still, lessons learned from the first to the second war did improve performance. As in Afghanistan, Spetsnaz GRU did an outsized share of the fighting. This was again because they were the only type of force, beside parts of the VDV and the Naval Infantry, that could quickly adapt to a form

of fighting for which neither the Soviet nor the Russian regular militaries were trained. Thus, rather than filling their role as a strategic instrument at the hands of the political and military leadership, they again compensated for army weaknesses on the tactical and operational levels.

It is far more difficult to ask the "Was it worth it?" question about the Chechen wars than it was about the Afghan war. The latter was a foreign adventure; the former were about Russian territorial integrity. Countries generally go to extraordinary lengths to prevent parts of their realm from seceding. Still, the costs in terms of people killed and material destroyed make an impression in these latter wars. Estimates of the total number of directly war-related deaths, both civilian and military, vary widely for both wars. The Russian demographer S. Ryazantsev estimates this figure to be between 54,000 and 61,000 in both wars combined.[139] Taus Dzhabrailov, head of Chechnya's interim parliament in 2005, claims that it may be as high as 160,000.[140] Whatever the real figure, these sacrifices still only formally preserved Chechnya as a part of Russia. To what extent the republic is really under Kremlin control can be questioned even today. The current Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, while paying lip service to Putin and Russian territorial integrity, may in fact be running an independent state funded by Russian taxpayers. More than 80 percent of the republic's budget in 2016 came in the form of subsidies from Moscow.[141] True, there are subunits of the Russian Federation that receive even more, but critics could still argue that the human and material costs of the two Chechen wars have bought little more than an on-paper preservation of Russian territorial integrity that comes at an exorbitant yearly rent.[142]

The final, and possibly most important, legacy of these wars, however, is even more controversial. Admirers and critics of President Vladimir Putin may agree that the wars were instrumental in his coming into and staying in power. Still, they view the consequences of

the wars for the development of Russia over the previous 20-plus years very differently. For the admirers, these wars prevented Russia from falling apart in the way that the Soviet Union did. Alpha veteran General Gennadii Zaitsev, in a tribute to President Putin and his Chechen campaigns, wrote in 2016: "It is mainly thanks to Putin that the Russian Federation was saved from breaking apart."[143] For the critics, the two Chechen wars are a major reason why Russia fell off the track to democracy. For example, the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner and former editor of the liberal and oppositionist newspaper *Novaia Gazeta*, Dmitrii Muratov, is in no doubt that the Chechen wars "murdered Russian democracy in its cradle."[144]

In terms of institutional memory, we do not know a lot about how the lessons of the 1990s have influenced the thinking of GRU Spetsnaz and FSB Spetsnaz. For example, do these forces, because of what happened in August 1991 and October 1993, again worry about being pressured to take sides in power struggles at the top? Did experiences from the wars in Tajikistan and Chechnya leave an impression within these organizations that their officers under certain circumstances may some day have to act on their own in making strategic decisions? Most likely, these episodes and wars do not occupy much of the thinking among the majority of special operations forces officers in their daily service today. Still, the Russian military observer Aleksandr Golts has pointed out ominously that those who now enter the commanding posts of the Russian military started their careers during the beginning of these "interesting times." Thus, interfering in politics may not be as unthinkable for them as it was for those who spent their formative years during the Soviet period.[145] Should Russia once more enter turbulent waters at home or abroad, spetsnaz officers may be compelled to look back at what their colleagues did in the 1990s. They may once again be put on the spot in terms of their political loyalty. In fact, several commentators have pointed out that it did not seem like Alpha or Vympel did anything to try to stop the mutiny of the private

military company Wagner in June 2023.[146] Wagner, led by Evgenii Prigozhin, was furious at how the company was treated by the regular Russian military during their joint fighting in Ukraine. Thus, they organized a column of their own forces and headed for Moscow to depose Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov. Before they could reach the capital, however, a negotiated solution was found. We do not yet know what went on behind the curtains in the Kremlin during those two days, but it is not impossible that the loyalty of Spetsnaz FSB again in some way was tested—just as it had been in 1991 and 1993.

4

RETURN OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION, 2008—2023

Suddenly, artillery started hitting left and right. The SzGRU officer with the call-sign "Sneg" (Snow) yelled for the Chechens he was directing to find the Georgian forward artillery observer that presumably was to blame for the mayhem.[1] It was the fourth day of the August 2008 five-day war between Georgia and Russia. Sneg was the designated GRU military adviser to the ethnic Chechen Vostok Battalion. He had been with the battalion since spring. At that time, the GRU had decided to clean up the battalion's reputation. Nobody ever doubted their ability to fight, but many in the Russian military saw them as somewhat of a ragtag band.

Sneg's arrival was an effort to formalize the battalion as a unit of the Russian armed forces. Senior military leaders hoped that an adviser's supervision from the regular brigades would not only strengthen the unit's reputation but also improve performance. The idea was to add modern military theory and doctrine to the existing combat experience and demonstrated courage of the Chechens.

Vostok had, on paper, been a unit of the Russian 42nd GMD since its creation during the Second Chechen War. In Georgia, however, they mostly took orders directly from the operational command or from the command of the Northern Caucasus Military District or even directly from Moscow. How to implement their orders was largely up to them.

The Georgian forward artillery observer was soon found in one of the adjacent courtyards. He was in the company of two other Georgian soldiers who had been shooting up Russian tanks. The Chechens eliminated all three on the spot. At the same time, the rest of the

Georgian forces were pulling back from the village. Despite this fact, barrages suddenly started all over again. Sneg ordered everyone to take cover in whatever basement they could find. The new salvo lasted approximately 30 minutes. Two Vostok fighters were wounded. What the Chechens did not know was that this new salvo came from their own guns and not the Georgians. A communication-and-control foul-up had led the Russian operational leadership to believe the village was still on Georgian hands and Vostok far away.

Despite his official advisory role, Sneg's position with the Chechens was tenuous. In reality, he had little to rely on in terms of formal power. True, the Chechens would most of the time abide his instructions, but they also made it clear that it was done without any enthusiasm. There were several reasons for this.

Most important, for Chechens, official rank gave little power. The unit practiced a degree of internal egalitarianism absent in the regular Russian forces. That made unqualified compliance with orders rare. In fact, the only way Sneg could make the fighters follow his instructions over time was by building personal authority. That meant that he needed to be braver than them in battle. According to the journalist Orkhan Dzhemal, who accompanied Vostok and Sneg in this war, the demand for demonstrated bravery sometimes meant Sneg taking risks well beyond what was advisable. Dzhemal often thought to himself that advisers in such positions would not last long. The required display of boldness would put them in front of a bullet more often than most.

Additionally, Sneg needed to maintain an extremely fine balance between push and restraint. If he showed just a smitten more than they liked of the former, he was an upstart and a GRU snob. Going slightly too much in the other direction, and he was a dawdler and a weakling. Sneg's orders had to sound like polite requests without a trace of ingratiation and be seen as compulsory for the fighters to carry out. The Chechens probably felt that he needed them more than they needed him. They had fought successfully before Sneg arrived.

He, however, needed to demonstrate professional impact to his superiors.

Sneg compared his own predicament to Trotsky. On a much smaller scale, Sneg's job was similar to what the famous revolutionary faced when he transformed the partisan Red Guards into the regular Red Army in the years 1918 to 1925. The norms and practices of Vostok were much more similar to a guerrilla force than to those of a regular military unit. When the Chechens did as Sneg said, Dzhemal noticed that they would deliberately insert a miniscule pause between his orders and their conformation of them. In this way, they were able to follow command and demonstrate independence at the same time. In a regular unit, Sneg would never have tolerated such behavior. Here, he had no choice.

The final major hurdle for Sneg was his relations with Sulim Yamadaev, the unit's legendary leader. There was never any doubt about the fighters' personal loyalty to him. He was their real leader. That conviction trumped any recognition of Sneg's authority, whether formal or earned through combat. Luckily, Sulim did not seem particularly hostile to Sneg's presence. Still, from time to time he would take the opportunity to demonstrate who was really in charge. One night after fighting, the battalion slept in a field. Suddenly, without warning, somebody flicked on the cabin light in the Barguzin van that served as battalion mobile headquarters. Vostok's position was in an instant observable from miles around. Sneg reacted before his painstakingly acquired diplomatic instincts had time to switch on. "Have you gone completely crazy!" he exploded. "The Georgians are still retreating our way from Tskhivali. They will catch us while we are still in our sleeping bags." This outburst was one step too far. Yamadaev immediately cut him off. He snorted: "Leave them alone, they know what they are doing. After all, they are no less battle hardened than you." The bristling Sneg could only back down.

Later, Sneg shared with Dzhemal that, in contrast to the regular army, with the Chechens you had to "respect each and every one of

them. And, I mean, respect from your heart, not just for show."[2] In a different way, this rule also applied to Sulim. Dzhemal never heard him curse his men. He would even allow them to second-guess him without repercussions. Once, a subordinate commander named Vakhtang disagreed with Sulim about the treatment of some Georgian prisoners of war. Sulim wanted to send them to the intelligence cell of the 58th Army for questioning. Vakhtang argued that they were just randomly recruited Georgian peasants who knew nothing of value. There was a sharp exchange of words between the two, and the offended officers turned their backs on each other. However, there was no way Sulim would punish Vakhtang for obstinacy in this case.

Sulim spoke Russian with a heavy accent. A period of working in business in Moscow in the early 1990s caused no significant effect on his intonation. In the First Chechen War, he fought side by side with the Islamist radical Shamil Basaev against the Russian forces. After that conflict, however, he became increasingly disgusted with the arriving Arab Islamists. In particular, he could not tolerate their disregard for the local Sufi Islamist traditions of Chechen society. When the second war came, he and his five brothers switched to the Russian side. In 2005 Sulim formally became an officer of the Russian armed forces as head of the Vostok Battalion. The same year, he also received the prestigious Hero of the Russian Federation award. However, his intensifying conflict with the Kremlin's main strongman in Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, made his life increasingly difficult. Kadyrov saw the Yamadaev brothers as an independent center of power that threatened his control. Therefore, in May 2008, under the influence of Kadyrov, an investigative committee of the Chechen republic declared Sulim wanted in connection with charges of murdering innocent civilians.

Sulim's reputation in terms of humanity in warfare is controversial. The investigative reporters and Chechnya experts Anna Politkovskaia and Elena Milashina have both accused him of excessive brutality. Politkovskaia claimed Sulim had been repeatedly involved in

kidnapping for ransom, and Milashina wrote that he was famous for his unbelievable cruelty and proud of his "SS guy" call-sign.[3] But the two Russian journalists Orkhan Dzhemal and Arkadii Babchenko, working for the same newspaper as Politkovskaia and Milashina, claimed to have seen a fundamentally different Sulim during the Georgia war. According to Dzhemal, the Vostok Battalion to his surprise fought more or less in correspondence with "Western humanitarian standards."[4] Dzhemal makes a point of stating that this was not at all due to instructions from Russian commanders.[5] Babchenko, who himself was a private on the Russian side in the First Chechen War, argues that Vostok related to prisoners of war in Georgia the way most Russian troops had treated Chechen POWs only at the beginning of that war. Nobody tormented them, and they enjoyed the same material standards as the Russian troops themselves.[6] According to both journalists, this civilized approach stood in stark contrast to the excessive brutality of the South Ossetian militias.[7]

In one legendary episode, the Georgians even showed their appreciation for Vostok's lack of cruelty. In the process of recapturing the North Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, the Chechens were tasked with clearing some hilly terrain at the outskirts of the city of Georgian troops. During a lull in the fighting, the Chechens decided to have lunch. As soon as they sat down, however, incoming Georgian artillery picked up again. Annoyed, Sulim sent a "parliamentarian" over to the enemy positions with a white flag. The latter delivered a written message to the Georgians. This note said: "We are having lunch and you are disturbing us. Unless you stop this shooting we will come over to your positions mad with hunger and cut your throats." The Georgian shelling stopped, and a little while later a Georgian "parliamentarian" arrived at the Chechen position. He brought freshly baked bread, fruit, and vegetables for Vostok to spice up their lunches. After devouring the Georgian delicacies, the fighters rested for an

hour, reignited the fighting, dislocated the Georgians from their positions, and let them return home unharmed.[8]

When the war with Georgia started, the Kremlin decided they needed Sulim for the war effort. They paid no attention to the fact that he was now wanted by the law. All criminal investigations were temporarily put on hold. According to Sulim himself, the General Staff had asked him directly to go to South Ossetia. "I was in hospital in Moscow, but they came for me and said: Hey Sulim, it is war, you must go and fight for Russia!"[9]

Sulim arrived in Tskhinvali on 9 August in the company of several Russian generals. This was one day after Russia had started its offensive as a response to the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali. Vostok came to play a significant role in the Russian fighting. Dzhemal, admittedly biased from being embedded with the battalion, is adamant that there is no way the Russians could have won in just five days without Vostok.[10] The Chechens served in a mixed storming and reconnaissance role, and they were especially efficient in the urban battles in Tskhinvali.[11] Sulim, on the other hand, was far from satisfied with his Russian comrades in arms. According to him, the Russian warfare could only be summarized with the word "chaos."[12]

After Russian forces had taken control of Tskhinvali, Vostok was ordered to front a taskforce going toward the Ossetia-Georgia internal border. They set in motion at the head of a column consisting of the 693rd Motor Rifle Regiment and a regiment from the 76th VDV Air Assault Division from Pskov. Echoing complaints made by Spetsnaz GRU from Afghanistan to Chechnya, also Sneg deplored the fact that once again spetsnaz was doing somebody else's job. "This is not what we specialize in" he said. "We are diversonaries. We discover strategic intelligence and create havoc behind enemy lines. However, there just was no one else to do the ⟦light infantry⟧ job."[13]

Later, Vostok learned that the task force, without realizing it, had left South Ossetian territory and entered the uncontested part of

Georgia. This took place near the village of Zemo Nikozi. Nobody had seen any sign of a border. The commander of the task force, however, was not ready to admit this mistake to his superiors. He lied, telling higher-ups that he was still in Ossetia, about six kilometers distant from Zemo Nikozi. Because of this untruth, the higher-ups thought the village was still on Georgian hands. This is what caused the second round of artillery described above. They gave the artillery a free hand on the settlement. The artillery commander started shelling the village, convinced that all friendly forces were at a safe distance. In fact, Vostok was right on the target.

As soon as the blue-on-blue incident was recognized, a white-faced Russian lieutenant colonel appeared at the Vostok temporary headquarters. This was the commander of the artillery battery who had come to apologize. His lips were trembling. It was obvious he had heard stories about what Chechens might do to those who caused them harm. Sulim, however, brushed off the whole episode. He told the lieutenant colonel that such things happen in war. Only two of his men were wounded and nobody had died.

Zemo Nikozi was the only battle that Vostok took part in after crossing into Georgia proper. The unit was halted by orders from above about three kilometers from Gori. From there, they evacuated by helicopter back to Tskhinvali.

Vostok's contributions in Georgia, however, did not yield Sulim goodwill or protection after the war. For the Kremlin, the relationship with his enemy Kadyrov was the priority. Sulim was soon back on the criminal most-wanted list. The Chechen investigative committee again started to hunt him all over Russia. In the end, he fled abroad, but even that did not save his life. In March 2009, he was gunned down in Dubai, most likely by representatives of Ramzan Kadyrov.

The return to Russian geopolitical conflict with the West had significant consequences for the evolution of spetsnaz. We may argue about when the post–Cold War peace was over and great power competition again became the dominant element of relations between

Russia and the West. Some will claim that the turning point was President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. There, he surprised Western audiences by accusing the United States of forcing its will on the world, including by military means. Others will say that the annexation of Crimea and the instigation of an armed rebellion in Donbas in Ukraine in 2014 represented the watershed moment. For the first time since World War II, one European country seized a part of another by force. A third candidate, however, may be the five-day war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. Three years after this event, then–Russian President Dmitry Medvedev told a gathering of military officers that this war had been a signal to NATO to "think about geopolitical stability before making a decision to expand the alliance."[14] According to the Russian analyst Fyodor Lukyanov, this was the first time that a Russian official had justified that war as anything more than the protection of compatriots. In fact, he argues, the Georgia War was Moscow's "psychological revenge after a 20-year-long geopolitical retreat."[15]

Despite victory, the war was an embarrassment for the Russian political and military establishments. The fact that Russia had won was only a small consolation. So many things had gone wrong. If not for the massive quantitative superiority, the country might have lost. Not surprisingly, an effect similar to the one that took hold after Russia lost the Crimea War (1853–1856) came to the fore. After 1856, Nikolay Miliutin had reformed the Russian military radically. Now, the new minister of defense, Anaolii Serdiukov, did the same. The upheavals to units and personnel were enormous. In 2012, Serdiukov actually had to leave his post because of all the enemies he had created in the process.

SPETSNAZ IN THE WAR WITH GEORGIA

Widespread reform disruptions had far-reaching consequences for spetsnaz. That was especially the case because they became one of the scapegoats for what had gone wrong in Georgia. According to an anonymous article in the Russian daily *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, several top officers gave the GRU, both the agentura and spetsnaz, a poor grade for their efforts in Georgia.[16] If this report is true, the degrading of the SzGRU brigades during the Serdiukov reforms may have some of its background in how the senior military leadership saw their own performance in this war.

An alternative interpretation is that other agents within the military scapegoated spetsnaz to cover up their own mistakes. One source suggests that the commander in chief of the ground forces, General Vladimir Boldyrev, needed someone to blame for the poor performance of his regular troops in Georgia.[17] This was especially the case with army intelligence, which yet again was one of the major weaknesses of the Russian war effort. It may have been the case that Boldyrev was able to convince the political and military leadership that Spetsnaz GRU was to blame for the intelligence foul-ups in Georgia. The spetsnaz themselves responded that they had provided the rest of the armed forces with plenty of intelligence but that it had been squandered. The other branches and services did not know how to make proper use of it.[18]

In addition to the Vostok Battalion, the spetsnaz effort in Georgia consisted of four companies from the 10th SzGRU Brigade, one company from the 22nd SzGRU Brigade, and one company from the 45th SzVDV Brigade.[19] Of these, two had already been deployed to Abkhazia in the spring of 2008 as part of the Russian peacekeeping contingent there.[20]

Most of the remaining spetsnaz arrived in theater more or less simultaneously with the rest of the Russian troops. In terms of their deployment, many things stayed similar to the Second Chechen War. Indeed, it was reminiscent of most Spetsnaz GRU's operational

experience. They did a good job, but mainly as light infantry and not as special operations forces.[21] For instance, spetsnaz fought shoulder to shoulder with Vostok to rescue a battalion of the 135th Motorized Rifle Regiment that was blockaded by Georgian forces in the Shankhay part of Tskhinvali, and they conducted cleanup operations alongside Vostok and VDV units in ethnic Georgian villages north of Tskhinvali.[22]

There were, however, also some attempts at more SOF-like operations. For example, the leadership of the 58th Army decided to insert some SzGRU units behind enemy lines to conduct special reconnaissance and to direct artillery fire in areas around Tskhinvali. For this purpose, a special operations task group from the 22nd Brigade arrived in South Ossetia in the morning on 9 August. It was immediately subdivided into five detachments that consisted of between 12 and 14 operators each. These were transported by helicopter to their different designated positions. However, according to the memoirs of some of those who took part in that operation, army intelligence had been sloppy when recommending exactly where the detachments should deploy. The result was that the Georgians were waiting for two of them when they arrived. These units met heavy fire from the ground as they tried to land and had to return to Beslan in North Ossetia.[23] The three other units landed in their designated areas without problems, but they deployed in locales of minimal operational significance. They wandered aimlessly around more or less without seeing enemy forces.

The 9 August operation in Georgia seems to have become something of an institutional trauma in the 22nd. In 2011, the unit published its own history in book form. Here, the authors argue that this operation was the most stupid Russian attempt at landing any kind of forces behind enemy lines since the Soviet Union had made similar blunders with Airborne troops during World War II. Furthermore, they blame it all on the army.[24] SzGRU Lieutenant Colonel Askerov,

who took part in the operation himself, deplored the same things that many spetsnaz throughout their history have done. According to him, spetsnaz were subordinated "to regular army officers who have no idea what to do with them and that always ends in failure."[25] Another commentator, Aleksandr Zalesskii, calls the episode "criminal incompetence" and puts the guilt squarely on General Boldyrev himself. According to Zalesskii, this army commander "did not have the faintest clue what to do with Special Forces."[26] Who is more right in the mutual recriminations between Boldyrev and the different voices of the spetsnaz community is impossible to judge for outsiders. However, the fact that this attempt at a SOF-like deployment of spetsnaz failed spectacularly seems clear.

Finally, there is the controversial and inadequately documented claim that spetsnaz may have been deployed by Moscow already before the Georgian assault on Tskhinvali to provoke conflict. Most Western accounts of the war agree that the Russian invasion was a response to the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali. However, there is still disagreement on the issue of who actually started hostilities. Some think Russia is to blame because the country deliberately provoked Georgia to attack.[27] The purpose would be to create a pretext for a Russian invasion to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Others dispute this interpretation and put the blame squarely on Georgia.[28]

In support of the provocation hypotheses, it seems clear that the 107th SzGRU Special Task Force from the 10th Brigade out of Molkino had been operating in South Ossetia at least since April 2008. According to the spetsnaz historian Aleksandr Sever, the status of this unit was as an "unofficial" part of the Russian peacekeeping battalion.[29] The number of operators may have been as low as 40.[30] One former economic adviser to President Putin, later an ardent Putin critic, Andrei Illarionov, has suggested that the main job of this unit was to provoke armed hostilities between the South Ossetians and the

Georgians. He maintains that observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on the ground told him as early as July 2008 they were certain that a professional Russian military diversionary force was active on the ground. This unit was shooting first in one direction then in the other to make both sides believe the adversary was escalating.[31] The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has not confirmed this information, and it is difficult to corroborate from other open sources. A subsequent European Council independent factfinding mission on the Georgia War only goes as far as confirming "the presence of some Russian forces in South Ossetia, other than the Russian [JPFK—Joint Peacekeeping Force] battalion, prior to 14.30 hours on 8 August 2008."[32]

If Illarionov's allegation in some form should be true, this would be an example of the strategic use of spetsnaz for which they were always trained but rarely used. Based on the evidence currently available from open sources, however, no firm conclusion is possible. It is nevertheless interesting to note that then–President Medvedev traveled to Molkino to give the 10th Brigade the military's Zhukov Order for their contributions in the Georgia War. No other spetsnaz unit deployed to this war received a similar honor.

Be that as it may, the victory in Georgia was no cause for celebration in Moscow. For the Russian political leadership, Georgia was a moment of truth in terms of the state of affairs in the country's armed forces.[33] Immediately after the war, Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdiukov initiated a fundamental reform of all the Russian armed forces. That included spetsnaz.

SPETSNAZ GRU IN THE SERDIUKOV REFORMS

The reform had already been prepared for some time before Georgia.[34] Originally, it was motivated by the fact that military expenditures had been rising without leading to tangible improvements in capability. Thus, Georgia was at least as much a catalyst as a cause. Serdiukov's main role was to force the reforms through against the anticipated stiff resistance from most of the officer corps. He largely succeeded, but he also became an object of intense hatred among Russian officers. That is still the case today. Furthermore, this new minister was largely ignorant on purely military matters. Thus, the actual content of reform was left to a small group of forward-looking officers under the leadership of the chief of the General Staff, Nikolai Makarov.[35] The main thrust of the reform was the change from a massive mobilization-based army to a much smaller but more professional force with high readiness. This was in essence the same transformation that many Western militaries had gone through about 10 years earlier.

In terms of SOF, however, the reform did not follow Western blueprints. Since the 9/11 events, the number of SOF units and personnel had increased dramatically in many Western countries. They also received significantly more operational autonomy. This happened through the establishment of SOF commands more or less independent from the regular branches of the army, navy, and air force.[36] The Russian reform team took the opposite path. They suggested cutting the number of troops and units. What is more, they stripped Spetsnaz GRU of much of their remaining operational autonomy. Spetsnaz GRU were actually for a time fully subordinated to the new regional joint commands (RJCs) and taken away from GRU.

In 2009, Spetsnaz GRU was reduced from nine to seven brigades. The 67th Brigade in Berdsk in Siberia and the 12th in Asbest in the Urals were shut down completely. In addition, around 1,000 officer positions throughout the service were removed.[37] According to one

anonymous SzGRU source, the organization was ordered to cut overall costs by 30 percent.[38]

The closing of the brigade in Berdsk led to an episode unparalleled both before and after in Soviet and Russian spetsnaz history. On 9 March 2009, a group of about a thousand locals took to the streets to protest the closing of the brigade. They also demanded the dismissal of Minister Serdiukov. Several serving spetsnaz officers and soldiers together with their families took part in the action. This happened despite strict orders from their superiors to stay away.[39] It is unclear what consequences the protest had for the men involved, but the fact that special operations forces took to the streets to fight orders from above is not common in Russia or other countries.

For SOF, it is of great significance whether they carry out missions directly on behalf of the national leadership or in support of other elements of the military organization. It is mostly in the former role they can claim a strategic capacity. General Sergei Breslavskii, a second-generation spetsnaz officer and one of the strongest proponents for the later Special Operations Command, commented on the decision to resubordinate Spetsnaz GRU by saying that, unless the SOF "customer" is the national leadership, they are not special operations forces.[40] To allow spetsnaz to concentrate on strategic missions, he suggested a new approach. Russian doctrine should state more clearly that regular military units are responsible for the operational intelligence they need. SOF should be reserved for gathering intelligence needed directly by the top military and political leaderships. To make this distinction clear organizationally, Breslavskii, echoing developments in many Western countries, suggested that SOF should become a separate branch of the Russian military.[41]

What happened was largely the opposite of what Breslavskii had suggested. The resubordination of Spetsnaz GRU from the strategic level to the RJCs was unprecedented in Soviet and post-Soviet times.

The brigades were until 2009 always double-subordinated to both the GRU and the RJCs. The former used to be in charge of personnel decisions, most weapons procurement, doctrines, and training, the latter for the brigades' deployment in war. In the case of armed conflict, the plan was that special cells would be established within the intelligence organizations of each RJC that included officers from GRU. These would make sure regional non-SOF commanders understood fully how these forces were trained and how they could best be deployed.

According to the new arrangement, however, they would become the responsibility of the RJCs alone. This would be the case both in times of peace and war. Those who argued against the decision claimed, based on the operational experience of most Soviet and Russian post–World War II conflicts, that the RJCs would have no idea how to utilize the new capability at their disposal. After two years, in March 2011, an anonymous General Staff source admitted to the Russian daily *Moskovskii Komsomolets* that the resubordination of Spetsnaz GRU had been a serious mistake. Things developed more or less exactly as the critics had predicted. The RJCs had not, since they took over full responsibility for Spetsnaz GRU, been able to develop any viable doctrines or plans for the use and further development of the brigades. The General Staff source therefore concluded that at that moment the brigades existed in a "suspended state" within the RJCs.[42]

Something similar seems to have taken place in the navy SOF.[43] Until the Serdiukov reforms, these brigades were also part of GRU. Command over them, however, was sometimes contested between GRU and the navy. For example, during the Second Chechen War the operational command repeatedly asked for participation also from navy SOF. The navy leadership, however, declined.[44] If GRU command over these units had not been contested, the navy leadership would not have been in a position to refuse.

In recognition of all these problems, the decision to fully subordinate Spetsnaz GRU to the RJCs was partially reversed in 2013. Personnel decisions, training, and doctrine still remained the responsibility of the RJCs, but the troops again became part of GRU.[45] Furthermore, the new defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, and the new Chief of the General Staff, Valerii Gerasimov, did not agree with their predecessors that Spetsnaz GRU should morph into army intelligence. Possibly convinced by the forceful new head of the GRU, Igor Sergun, they saw a new future for the brigades in the realm of unconventional warfare.

The 2013 partial reversal, however, did not mean that Spetsnaz GRU would always get its way. For example, just before the annexation of Crimea, the familiar problem of joint spetsnaz and VDV officer education returned. Spetsnaz were never really at home in the VDV's officer school in Ryazan. Many older SzGRU veterans still remember that VDV hero Vasily Margelov would not even recognize the presence of spetsnaz students when he was head of the school. True, for a period of 15 years, things became easier when spetsnaz officer training moved from Ryazan to the Novosibirsk Higher Military Command School in 1994. However, as part of the Serdiukov reforms' focus on closing bases, spetsnaz officer training was returned to Ryazan. Spetsnaz GRU again became dependent on VDV goodwill for their officer training.

When the former Spetsnaz GRU officers Sergei Kozlov and Pavel Kostin visited the Ryazan school in spring 2019, they found the spetsnaz students even more marginalized than the 9th Company had been during the Cold War. Back then, at least the GRU leadership on occasion had been able to intervene on the spetsnaz's behalf. Most important, they had forced through a decision to make the commander of the 9th Company the second-in-command of the school. In that way, spetsnaz had one of their own in a senior position to look after their interests. Now, however, there was no such provision. As of spring 2019, very few of the instructors at Ryazan had any spetsnaz

experience. Representatives of the school talked to Kozlov and Kostin about the spetsnaz students as "secondhand material and leftovers."[46] Furthermore, many of the spetsnaz students did not get to serve as spetsnaz officers after the end of their study. For example, of the 250 students that finished the spetsnaz faculty in 2019, only 80 went on to serve in spetsnaz units. The rest dispersed among infantry, tank, and other types of units because these services' needs for officers were seen as more important.[47]

Moreover, language training also seemed to have suffered in comparison with how it was during the Cold War. Kozlov claims that only about one-fifth of spetsnaz students at Ryazan now studied foreign languages. Of these, only a very few again achieved any serious command of the languages they studied.[48]

Why, then, did Spetsnaz GRU suffer such a different fate compared to the SOF units of many Western countries?

First, the reform team may simply have considered the future military utility of SOF different from their Western colleagues. Sources from inside the reform team allegedly talked about Spetsnaz GRU as "yesterday's forces."[49] They pointed to the fact that most of the US nuclear weapons in Europe were now gone. Thus, the main founding rationale for Spetsnaz GRU had disappeared. According to the same source, they also thought that most of the remaining domestic spetsnaz tasks could be performed by the Ministry of the Interior's special forces.

Second, Spetsnaz GRU may have been a victim of bureaucratic infighting. Given that SOF do not possess their own domain in the way that land forces, air forces and navies do, they frequently dependent on external support. This can be for example individual politicians, factions within the bureaucracy or particularly influential individuals from their own ranks who reach high office.[50] SOF often have a hard time convincing the other parts of the military establishment about their value. This is not peculiar to Russia, but

rather a historical norm. Colin Grey argues that "SOF always need powerful political sponsorship, because they are typically more or less anathema to regular-minded regulars."[51]

Several anonymous former spetsnaz officers interviewed by the Russian *New Times* weekly, were in 2019 convinced that both the FSB and the SVR had been working to weaken their historical rival. Former Vympel operator Anatolii Yermolin thought that the decline of GRU at least partly might have been the result of a "special operation" from the service he once used to belong to.[52] The rivalry may have been directed against the agentura part of GRU but then also hit spetsnaz as a side effect.

This bureaucratic explanation does not necessarily have to do only with the rivalry between the GRU and other services. It is also possible that the old internal agentura–spetsnaz opposition had an effect. We saw in the case of Ivashutin how important it is for Spetsnaz GRU that the head of the GRU takes a genuine interested in them. That does not seem to have been the case in the late 1990s and the 2000s. General Valentin Korabelnikov, head of the GRU from 1997 to 2009, came from the agentura. Despite now being responsible for the whole of GRU, he was known to choose the agentura side in internal conflicts.[53] In fact, it is possible that the initiative to close the brigades in Berdsk and Asbest actually came from Korabelnikov himself.[54] When Korabelnikov was forced to resign in 2009, his deputy, General Aleksandr Shliakhturov, took over. Russian sources claim that he was even less concerned with the fate of Spetsnaz GRU than Korabelnikov had been.[55] Many in this organization had come to see spetsnaz as a fifth wheel on the wagon.[56] The downgrading of Spetsnaz GRU may therefore have been influenced by a struggle for money and influence within the GRU, as well as between the GRU and other agencies.

Finally, it seems relatively certain that Spetsnaz GRU was demoted not necessarily because the reform team did not like SOF as such but

because they did not think that Spetsnaz GRU in their current shape was right for the job. Many saw a symbol of deep distrust in the fact that Serdiukov declined to visit Spetsnaz GRU at the organization's 60-year anniversary celebration in October 2010. According to one source, Serdiukov's disregard for this occasion was without precedence in Spetsnaz GRU's history.[57] Serdiukov, Makarov, and others may have thought it would be easier to get SOF to their liking by creating something new from scratch rather than by trying to reform what was already there. Makarov in particular reasoned that if Spetsnaz GRU morphed into army intelligence, then the SOF niche would be vacant.[58] In this case, it made sense to cut the old to install the new. Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov proclaimed the creation of the new Special Operations Command (Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsii—SSO) in the spring of 2013.[59]

SSO—RUSSIA'S DELTA FORCE?

While Serdiukov and Makarov may have been hard on Spetsnaz GRU, that did not at all mean they dismissed the utility of special operations forces as such. To the contrary, with the establishment of the new SSO in 2013 they probably created a force that was the closest to a Western SOF that either the Soviet Union or Russia had ever seen. The only potential contender for that status would probably be Vympel before 1993.

It was at a meeting with military attaches in Moscow in March 2013 that Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov announced that Russia, "after studying the experience of other leading countries in the world," had established its own new Special Operations Command. He failed, however, to clarify that he was talking about a new autonomous special operations unit rather than providing Russian SOF with its own independent command. An anonymous MOD source commented

on the announcement that the new force would augment Russian capacities within unconventional warfare and low-intensity conflicts.[60]

The new unit was indeed based on learning from abroad. In the same way that Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv in the year 987 had sent envoys to neighboring states to learn about their religions, Russian military delegations now visited Western countries to study their special operations forces.[61] Both the French and German forces impressed the Russian envoys, but US SOF excited them the most. Then–Chief of the General Staff General Nikolai Makarov visited United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) headquarters in Tampa, Florida, in 2012. Earlier the same year, a platoon from the 45th SzVDV Regiment had trained together with troops from the Green Berets' 10th Group at Fort Carson, Colorado. Both occasions helped the Russians understand what the Americans possessed that they did not. The US Delta Force in particular fascinated Makarov.[62] After Vympel had been wing-clipped following their refusal to storm the Duma in 1993, Russia had not acquired any dedicated, all-professional, tier-one SOF unit for the types of foreign missions mentioned by the anonymous MOD source.[63]

The need for something similar to what the Americans possessed had already been discussed in Soviet/Russian military circles at least since the early 1980s. At that time, an experiment with an all-officer unit took place within the 5th SzGRU Brigade in Marina Gorka, Belarus. The experiment was discontinued, however, mostly because it turned into an advancement dead end. By joining this unit, officers would miss the command experience necessary for career progress.[64] Nevertheless, the experiment still illustrates the recognition of a need for SOF units with more experience and a higher degree of professionalism than what regular, conscript-based brigades could provide. It is not clear from open sources why this need was suddenly acknowledged at that particular time, but it is logical to think that it

may have had something to do with the war in Afghanistan and possibly with the spetsnaz operations in Africa.

Officer-only units would also later sometimes be established ad hoc. When Pavel Grachev was minister of defense from 1992 to 1996, he revisited the idea of expanding these ad hoc units into a more permanent structure. However, again the plans did not come to fruition. The reason was partially financial constraints, partially disagreement over whether such forces should be subordinated to the GRU or to the General Staff directly.[65]

In March 1999, however, things finally started to change. Then–Chief of the General Staff Anatolii Kvashnin took the first step by establishing the 322nd Center for the Education of Specialists on the banks of Lake Senezh, about 75 kilometers northwest of Moscow. The "education" label here served as a cover for what was in fact a fully operational unit. The center soon came to be known only as "Senezh." In the beginning, the officers mainly came from the 16th and 22nd SzGRU Brigades. A central figure in the establishment of the Senezh was the legendary Aleksandr Musienko, the same officer who had been crucial in SzGRU operations in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. One of the first missions for Senezh was the establishment of the Zapad and Vostok ethnic Chechen battalions during the Second Chechen War. Operators from the unit also participated in the liquidation of enemy Chechen commanders themselves.[66] Thus, the organizational seeds of the later SSO can be found in the Second Chechen War, especially in the militarily successful Chechenization of that conflict.

Still, until the Serdiukov reforms, Senezh was little more than a specialist officer unit within Spetsnaz GRU. The acknowledged need for a tier-one unit was by itself insufficient to make Senezh become something more. With Serdiukov, however, that need was combined with the new minister's resoluteness and a presidential political backing that had not been there before. In addition, there was the inspiration from foreign designs.

Originally, many expected that Senezh would become some kind of a nucleus for the merger of several different existing SOF. For example, the former head of special intelligence in the General Staff, General E. Tishin, and the infamous nationalist and later criminally convicted Vladimir Kvachkov, suggested that Russia develop something similar to US SOCOM. Based on their recommendations, then–Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov even issued a directive to this effect. That initiative, however, was flatly rejected without further discussion by GRU head General Valentin Korabelnikov.[67] Korabelnikov had no interest in shifting the balance of power within his organization from spying to soldiering. He scornfully dismissed the SOCOM idea by saying that dealing with "soldiers' foot bindings" was the last thing he needed.[68]

When Senezh was renamed the Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsii (SSO—Special Operations Command) in March 2013, it became clear that a very different concept had been chosen. The new organization was yet another independent SOF force, not the overarching command for different types of forces that Tishin and Kvachkov had called for. Furthermore, SSO was now seen as the main instrument in the hands of Russian politicians for missions of high political significance, especially in cases where a need to follow up with larger conventional forces was not expected.

SSO was from the beginning seen as "Serdiukov's personal special force."[69] That fact exemplifies a general historical trend in the relations between political leaders and SOF. SOF historian Derek Leebaert argues that "many political leaders are drawn to these peculiar elites and take a certain defiant pride in serving as patrons of warrior cultures which annoy the high command."[70]

When Serdiukov and Makarov decided to expand Senezh into a full-fledged and independent new MOD special operations force, they went to the FSB for expertise rather than to the established spetsnaz brigades. No official justification for this spurning of Spetsnaz GRU's

competence was ever given, but at least two seem plausible. One is that both Serdiukov and Makarov may have suspected that little new would come from leaving the process with the "old spetsnaz." Another is that by this time the Anti-Terrorism Center of the FSB probably had more competence in some of the types of missions that the new SSO was planned to carry out than did the military. In particular, that may have been true in terms of skills such as manhunting and close-quarters combat. In the words of one military source, an idea that guided the military leadership during Serdiukov's time in office was to use Alpha experience to turn military raiders into professional manhunters.[71]

Former FSB General Igor Medoev in 2009 became the first commander of the new force. This was four years before the SSO was officially announced. Medoev was a confidante of Serdiukov. After service in Alpha, he worked for Serdiukov when the latter was head of the Russian tax service in the early 2000s.[72] However, for unknown reasons, Medoev was dismissed already in 2010. Next, another FSB general, Aleksandr Miroshnichenko, took over. To underscore the strategic significance of the new force, he was appointed deputy defense minister with responsibility for the SSO in 2010. Miroshnichenko had significant operational experience from serving in Afghanistan and other hotspots. However, his first meeting with Senezh did not go particularly well. The men saw him as suffering from a sever Alpha superiority complex. According to them, he demonstrated an almost total disregard for the substantial operational experience that Senezh itself had achieved since the late 1990s. Furthermore, he failed to understand that the MOD did not want to create an Alpha copy within their own organization.[73] Senezh operators came to see many of the Alpha instructors that arrived as prima donnas. As one of the Senezh operators derogatorily explained to the Russian weekly Voenno-Promyshlenniy *Kurer* in 2016: "Alpha expect to be driven to within 50 meters of an operational target, then

they rush inside and become heroes. They have no appetite for infantry foot bindings or for crawling around in mountains."[74]

The conflict between the two operational traditions reached a deadlock, and Serdiukov had to intervene. Not interested in losing Miroshnichenko, he suggested that the latter establish a second SSO center at Kubinka southwest of Moscow. Although Senezh and Kubinka in principal were supposed to be siblings, the former came to focus the training on unit-level qualities, whereas Kubinka had a focus on individual skills.[75] Kubinka became part of SSO more or less simultaneously with the official announcement of the new command in 2013. At the same time, Alexei Diumin became the new head of the service. Diumin hailed neither from Spetsnaz GRU nor Alpha. Instead, he had served in the Federal Protection Service (the Russian equivalent of the US Secret Service). Appointing someone from a third agency may have been an attempt to ameliorate the institutional conflict. However, it did not in any way mean that FSB was about to lose its sway within the SSO. When Diumin left for another job in 2015, Alpha returned. FSB General Aleksandr Matovnikov took over.

In addition to the internal conflicts, relations with the regular SzGRU brigades were not the best. Here, many saw the SSO as yet another step in the decline of their own organization.[76] In the same way that the Green Berets in 1977 had feared that Delta would run off with all the best men, Spetsnaz GRU now feared the same with SSO.[77]

SSO is today directly subordinated to the Chief of the General Staff. This is first of all an expression of the political and strategic roles of the force. Additionally, however, direct subordination also gives the service the bureaucratic standing it sometimes may need to get the job done. This fact differentiates the SSO from its Senezh predecessor. For example, in Chechnya the GRU could not on behalf of Senezh order the head of the navy or the air force to assist with aircraft or helicopter support when needed. They could of course ask for such backing, and there was even a special procedure in place for

dealing with such requests, but often the procedure took too long to decide for any eventual permission to be of use to Senezh's missions.[78] If Senezh in these cases had been directly subordinated to the General Staff, the latter could have given the orders for helicopter support without going through cumbersome procedures.

Still, even direct subordination to the General Staff may not always be enough. The lack of unhindered access to helicopters has been a persistent problem since spetsnaz's establishment in the 1950s. Only around 2010 did serious plans for a dedicated SOF rotary-wing capacity somewhat similar to the US 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment begin to emerge. Expectations rose when Russian media in 2012 announced that the MOD by the end of the year would issue a tender for a specifically built SSO multipurpose helicopter.[79] However, it took another eight years just for a test version of the frontrunner of this tender to fly. The winner was a modernized Mi-8 transport helicopter with a more powerful engine and a much-enhanced selection of onboard firepower.[80] In 2019, a contract for 10 of these helicopters was announced.[81]

More important, however, the purchase of SSO-specific helicopters is not necessarily the same as a truly independent SSO rotary wing. At the beginning of the 2020s, the administrative choice seemed to be in favor of training a certain percentage of army helicopter pilots to work with spetsnaz.[82] Currently, this is taking place at the Klin training base south of Moscow, which itself is a subdivision of the major army helicopter training center at Torzhok. Thus, a return to the dedicated spetsnaz helicopter wings of the two spetsnaz brigades during the later part of the Afghan war is not in the cards. A certain portion of pilots at all times trained to work with spetsnaz will help, but as long as there is no fully independent spetsnaz helicopter capacity these forces will have to compete with all the other helicopter needs of the army in case of conflict.

Finally, the improvements in SSO rotary-wing capabilities will not necessarily be the same for the SzGRU brigades. Even if Russian military procurement has been high since the early 2010s, money was still tight until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. One possibility is that only a handful are purchased for the most demanding missions of the SzGRU brigades and that cheaper, less modernized versions will remain "workhorses" for years to come.[83]

Currently, the SSO consists of several centers and units, two at Senezh, one at Kubinka, one in Sevastopol in Crimea, and the main operational unit, the only SSO brigade, at Prokhladnii in Kabardino-Balkaria in the North Causacus.[84] At Senezh, there is a command unit and one SSO operational center. This command unit also contains a training facility for SSO and other elements of the Russian military. Another operational center similar to the one at Senezh is still located at Kubinka.[85] One observer claims, however, that the Kubinka center, dating from Miroshnichenko's time, maintains much more of an FSB flair than does the one at Senezh.[86] In addition, the center at Sevastopol in Crimea is probably similar in structure to Kubinka and the combat units at Senezh but with a specialization in naval operations.[87] Finally, there is the 346th SSO Spetsnaz Brigade at Prokhladnii. This unit was originally set up as a military police brigade in 2009. However, when Defense Minister Serdiukov's military police program was cancelled in 2011, the 346th was handed over to the SSO and relocated to Prokhladnii.[88]

In 2010, there was the idea to integrate the four naval reconnaissance points (naval SOF) with Senezh. These navy SOF felt "ownerless" after the integration of the four fleets into the new regional commands.[89] Nothing, however, came of that idea. In the end, the SSO decided to develop its own naval capacity. The total numerical strength of the SSO is secret, but in 2014 it was independently

estimated at no more than 1,500 troops, including combat and support personnel.[90]

FSB CENTER FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS

After the 1991 failed coup attempt and the 1993 constitutional crisis, the old Spetsnaz KGB assumed a more withdrawn position. Alpha concentrated on domestic tasks and Vympel still suffered from their demotion after not supporting Yeltsin in 1993. However, already with the arrival of Vladimir Putin as head of the FSB in 1998, things started to change. At least since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, both units have been regularly involved in operations abroad again.

In October 1998 Putin established the FSB's Center for Special Operations (CSO, also known as the Anti-Terrorism Center) on the basis of Alpha and Vympel. The KGB veteran Aleksandr Tikhonov became head of the center. Thus, FSB, the KGB successor agency, was getting back into the SOF game.

The new CSO was located in Vympel's old base at Balashikha just east of Moscow. In 1999, a third S Directorate was added (*S* for *smerch*—tornado). This new unit was to deal with "preventive" antiterrorism. Information on this last unit in open sources is limited, but the idea seems to have been that, while Alpha maintained their responsibility for terrorist incidents as they happened, S would try to prevent them from happening in the first place. This could, for example, in a manner similar to elements of the US global war on terrorism, include liquidating known terrorists before they could do any harm.[91] Finally, in 2020 the local Alpha group in occupied Crimea was upgraded to a separate T Directorate (*T* for Tavrida), but presumably with assignments similar to Alpha.

Today, the A (Alpha) Directorate has a number of local branches, whereas V (*V* for Vympel) and S are central resources only. Sometimes

one may also se references to a K Directorate (*K* for Kavkaz, or Caucasus). The unit is organizationally on the level of the regional branches of Alpha, but with a specific responsibility for the North Caucasus. Although exact figures are secret, the total number of Spetsnaz FSB was in 2014 estimated to below 2,000.[92]

As can be expected, relatively little is known from open sources about the internal life of Spetsnaz FSB. Nevertheless, in 2003, in a remarkable incident, anonymous lower-level operators from Alpha and Vympel started to send a series of letters to the deputy head of the Duma Committee on Security at the time, Iurii Shchekochikhin. Admittedly, because of the anonymous character of these letters, their content must be taken with a grain of salt. Still, to the extent that they can be trusted, these letters gave a rare view into the corruption and unfairness the operators claimed had come to characterize the CSO.

In the first letter, they complained about the treatment the regular operators had received after the 2002 storming of the Nord-Ost (Dubrovka) Theater in Moscow. That operation was in response to a hostage crisis. The writers claimed that FSB's higher ranks, who had risked little and not demonstrated particular courage, still received most of the distinctions afterward. True, one regular operator each from Alpha and Vympel became Heroes of the Russian Federation, but this was miniscule in comparison with what the CSO top brass received.[93]

In the second letter, arriving about two months later, they describe how bureaucracy gradually had destroyed the efficiency of the CSO. According to the operators, before the Alpha and Vympel unification into the CSO, operational fighters had made up the vast majority of the force. Now, however, new generals and administrative staff were crowding them out. The operators feared that, in the case of an emergency, the organization might not be able to deploy more than 30–50 fighters. For every fighter, they wrote, there were now five to seven staff officers.

Furthermore, family-based clientelism had also exploded. Whole family dynasties had permeated the different branches of the organization, leading to connections taking priority over competence. They complained that their skills were becoming a circus attraction. Demonstrating skills to visiting guests, foreign and domestic, took priority over training for real situations. They claimed they were performing like "trained monkeys" to satisfy the appetites of the friends of their good-for-nothing generals.[94] Finally, they felt that operational secrets were given away unnecessarily through these demonstrations.

In a third letter, they described the economic corruption they saw spreading throughout the CSO. Most top brass would now, at the same time as they had their CSO job, also head one or more private companies. Thus, they would use their CSO positions to order goods and services from these companies to enrich themselves. Furthermore, recruitment to the highest and most well-paid positions went to individuals without any operational experience. At one time, both Alpha and Vympel were led by people who had never taken part in an actual operation.[95]

To what extent these problems have continued to plague CSO to the present day is hard to know. However, it is notable that Tikhonov continued to lead the CSO after the 2003 revelations. In fact, he stayed in this position for 25 years. Only in September 2022 was he relieved of his duties. That decision came after a scandalous shootout between FSB personnel and the Russian military in occupied Kherson in Ukraine. Tikhonov's son was involved on the FSB side. There was no dismissal in disgrace, but a major CSO corruption scandal from January 2022 has been mentioned in connection with his discharge. Both Alpha and Vympel operators were sentenced to between eight and ten years in prison for stealing a large amount of money for the businessman Aleksandr Yumaranov.

Besides these asserted examples of internal decay, both Alpha and Vympel became more focused on the domestic and to some extent the post-Soviet scene under the new CSO. This was not a particularly big change for Alpha, but the post-1993 Vympel is vastly different from the gray-zone diversionary capacity that Drozdov had set up in 1981. According to the security-services observer Andrei Soldatov, Vympel has maintained only a little bit of foreign diversionary predisposition. Mainly, it now trains for domestic tasks.[96] For a long time, one of its four units was permanently deployed to Chechnya. Later, it was given primary responsibility for the protection of strategic objects in Russia, in particular nuclear facilities. Whether the reorientation of Vympel to domestic tasks was punishment for disobedience in 1993, or happened because the Russia political leadership saw much less need for foreign covert subversive missions in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is not easy to say. Russia's relations with the West, in particular, were much more relaxed in those periods, and that could be an argument for the latter interpretation.

In 2006, however, a change in the law on foreign operations made clear that if there had been a period where such operations were presumed unnecessary, then that period was now over. In the summer of 2006, the Russian Duma adopted a new law that granted the Russian president the authority to use Russian SOF to kill anyone, not only on Russian soil but also abroad, who Russia deemed to be a terrorist. At the time, many saw the step as an urgent reaction to the killing of five Russian embassy employees in Iraq by an al-Qaeda affiliate, the Mujahideen Shura Council. Others, however, point out that the writing of the law had taken place before the Iraq incident and that a more likely interpretation is FSB lobbying for a stronger international role.[97]

For Vympel, this law may have been the opportunity they needed to start retaking some of the original and prestigious foreign subversive responsibility for which the unit was originally created.

The evidence of this is so far very scarce in open sources, but at least one independent FSB defector claimed on the YouTube channel Gulagu.net in 2022 that Vympel for a long time had been deploying abroad under cover of being soldiers for the private military company (PMC) Wagner.[98]

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the killing of the former anti-Russian Chechen platoon commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin in August 2019 has been connected to Vympel.[99] Khangoshvili, who was an ethnic Chechen from Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, had, according to Western and Georgian sources, acted as a counterintelligence agent in Georgia. He informed on members of his Pankisi community that the FSB or the leader of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, had recruited as spies. Whether the Khangoshvili operation is a forewarning of a Vympel return to its original rationale remains to been seen. The organization may limit itself to assassinations and single-operator actions, but it may also try to expand to external operations on a larger scale. In the latter case, however, they will most likely step on the toes of the GRU and the SSO. If that happens, a bureaucratic struggle for responsibilities is likely.

SPETSNAZ GRU, IRREGULAR WARFARE, AND IVASHUTIN'S GHOST

The fortunes for Spetsnaz GRU shifted somewhat for the better after the change from Anatoliy Serdiukov to Sergei Shoigu as ministers of defense in 2012, and from Nikolai Makarov to Valerii Gerasimov as Chiefs of the General Staff. Even more important for the forces' standing and influence, however, was probably the appointment of Igor Sergun as new head of the GRU in December 2011. Shoigu and Gerasimov maintained the SSO as developed by their predecessors, but they crucially returned the spetsnaz land brigades to at least partial GRU subordination. The main strategic rationale behind this reversal

seems to have been that Russia came to the conclusion it was in need of a military capability especially dedicated to irregular warfare.[100]

General Sergun, in particular, lobbied for that idea. Sergun's arrival at the GRU is sometimes compared to the 1963 onset of General Petr Ivashutin's long rule at the agency. Both were strong institutional players, and both placed high importance on the SzGRU brigades.[101] More officers from spetsnaz took on higher positions within the leadership of the GRU, and according to Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "a spetsnaz mentality [as opposed to agentura mentality] started to dominate the GRU."[102] In fact, according to one source, the legacy of Ivashutin became an official GRU topic of study under Sergun.[103]

So far, it seems fair to claim that the irregular warfare undertaken by the brigades has taken three forms: (1) covert military assistance; (2) managing the outsourcing of violence to commercial actors; and (3) the old Vympel portfolio of sabotage and other violent operations abroad in peacetime.

Running parts of the military resistance to the Ukrainian government in Donbas, the support and training of the Tiger Forces and other units in Syria, and the support for the warlord Khalifa Haftar in the civil war in Libya are probably the best examples of covert military assistance. In the case of Donbas, the Russian denial of this activity was more or less complete until the February 2022 invasion. In the case of the Tiger Forces, the picture is more mixed. The Russian engagement with these forces will be discussed in more detail below, but here it will be sufficient to point out that the overall Russian campaign in Syria of course is not covert at all. Russia is there on official invitation from the Syrian president. However, the fact of SSO interaction with and training of the Tiger Forces is not confirmed by official sources. The knowledge of this assistance is due to investigative reporting. Similarly, Russian military sources have confirmed in interviews that Russian SOF are present on the ground in

Libya, but they will not elaborate on what they have been doing there.[104] A Russian MOD source assigned the presence of "elite units" in Libya to the interests of Russian oil and gas companies in this country. However, there is little reason to doubt that they are also there to assist the warlord Haftar.[105]

Spetsnaz got a role in outsourcing violence to semicommercial actors in 2014–2015, especially in connection with the establishment of the Wagner PMC. In June 2010, the infamous founder of the South African private military company Executive Outcomes, Eeben Barlow, sat on one of the panels of the St. Petersburg Economic Forum. He gave a short presentation on military outsourcing to the private sector. However, the main reason for his presence in the city was to give another behind-closed-doors briefing to a small delegation from the Russian General Staff. Here, he touted the political advantages of using PMCs as tools in foreign policy.[106] In particular, the nonattribution argument seems to have been convincing for the audience. Some of the officers present still remembered the international humiliation after Qatari police arrested two serving GRU agents in 2004. They were charged with the murder of the exiled former Chechen separatist leader Zelimkhan Iandarbiev. The agents were later found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment, although after only a few months they were extradited to Russia. Sources close to the Russian MOD have confirmed that the thinking at the meeting with Barlow was that, if the assassins in Qatar instead had been well paid private contractors, then Russia could have disowned them.[107] In that case, it would have been the assassins themselves who took a calculated risk. They could therefore not have expected Russian authorities to recognize them and take the humiliating steps to get them back.

Furthermore, Barlow's arguments fit well with another vision within the Russian military elite. Already several years prior to the 2010 Barlow meeting, ideas for the creation of "pensioner commands"

(*kommandy otstavnikov*) for action outside the regular military had circulated in the Russian higher echelons.[108] Internal disagreements on the potential legal status of Russian PMCs, however, pushed the topic to the back burner for a while. Nevertheless, when Gerasimov took over as Chief of the General Staff in 2012, he took it up again. It was most likely he who was able to convince President Putin of the potential benefits of such companies.

Currently, the sources disagree on the role of the former convict and post-Soviet businessman Eugenii Prigozhin in the establishment of Wagner. Some argue he was not very enthusiastic about the new assignment.[109] Running such an organization could easily get him in trouble with those in the security structures opposed to PMCs, and he might have to take some blame if Wagner operations abroad went sideways. Under the reigning regime of state–business relations in Russia, however, there was no way he could refuse the "honor."[110] The Kremlin can in principle call on any domestic commercial activity to do its bidding.[111] If they refuse, there is no independent judicial system to protect them from Kremlin sanctions. Decisions on the deployment and use of the new capacity would of course rest with the Kremlin, but as compensation for any inconveniences Prigozhin would be able to use Wagner to pursue personal business interests abroad in addition to furthering Kremlin political agendas.

Others, to the contrary, think Prigozhin saw an opportunity and largely initiated the PMC himself. These tend to downplay the role of the GRU.[112] An intermediary position is taken by the former Wagner fighter Aleksandr Zlodeev. He was with the organization from its start in 2014 and claims that in the beginning it was decisively a GRU project. The first fighters received their salaries directly from the GRU, and their equipment and weapons came from MOD storage. Other sources support Zlodeev. Russian military sources claim that Wagner from the beginning was already thought of as an "informal MOD offshoot."[113] The clearest evidence of this was the fact that the

Wagner PMC set up camp across the street from the base of the 10th SzGRU Brigade at Molkino just south of Krasnodar in southern Russia. Training for Wagner started there in May 2015.[114] However, according to Zlodeev, after Prigozhin took control and later fell out with the MOD, the organization became more autonomous.[115]

Independent of who is right, Wagner became important to Prigozhin. He made a lot of money, especially from the engagements in Africa, and it is also likely that he came to see himself as an important player in the restoration of Russian greatness. This especially looks to be the case after Wagner got engaged in the full-scale war against Ukraine.

The Spetsnaz GRU and Wagner cooperation set a model. In 2018, individuals with close ties to the 45th SzVDV Brigade similarly set up their own PMC: initially named Shchit (Shield), later renamed Redut (Redoubt). As with Wagner, they located the training base close to the VDV facilities at Kubinka west of Moscow.[116] There is also information about a PMC called Patriot, which is supposed to have been set up more or less directly by the MOD. According to one observer, Patriot is an umbrella for about 10 smaller PMCs that work for the MOD mostly in Africa.[117]

There are not many details in open sources on how the actual interaction between spetsnaz and the PMCs has taken place, but inside sources have at least confirmed that a special department was set up within the GRU to handle all or most PMCs, including Wagner. This department was filled with spetsnaz veterans. One of these in fact drew a line back to the legacy of Khadji-Umar Mamsurov and the civil war in Spain. He compared Wagner to the advisers the Soviet Union sent to that war.[118]

Other examples of a close relationship include the fact that there may be no prohibition against active-duty military personnel also working for a PMC.[119] That is, operators can probably move relatively freely back and forth between government and private military

structures. For the ENOT PMC, according operators from that unit, during their operations in Donbas, the most consequential tasks were performed by active-duty SzGRU officers.[120] When not deployed, ENOT was irregularly visited by a SzGRU officer with the call-sign "Belka" (Squirrel). He would train them in hand combat and take part in organizing their trips to Donbas.[121]

ENOT, in contrast to Wagner and Shield, appears to have had more of a bottom-up history. It was founded by the Russian nationalist Roman Telenkevich in 2010 on a wave of patriotic sentiment in Russia. The unit started as a civilian vigilance committee patrolling the streets together with the police looking for places where illegal immigrants lived.[122] Thus, the ENOT example suggests that PMCs that are not set up as offshoots of regular military units may also develop close relations with spetsnaz.

For spetsnaz personnel, the PMCs serve as a way to earn extra money (the pay in for example Patriot is thought to be much higher than in Spetsnaz GRU) and as a tool for use in operations where nonattribution is particularly important. The latter is likely to include some of the trickiest political jobs. For example, there are strong suspicions that the assassination of the pro-Russian commander Aleksandr Bednov ("Batman") in Donbas in 2015 was the work of Wagner.[123]

The testing-out of PMCs was initially successful in terms of foreign policy but was also fraught with risks in terms of regime stability. Already after the infamous meeting with Eeben Barlow, strong military voices argued against this new and "un-systemic" phenomenon. They maintained there was a significant possibility that PMCs could slip out of control. In spring 2023, that is exactly what happened. Putin's Wagner experiment blew up in his face. Relations between Wagner and the regular military in Ukraine deteriorated to the extent that they started shooting at each other. In June, Prigozhin tried to put an end to what he saw as mistreatment by the Russian

MOD. He set his men on a march to Moscow to remove Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov and Minister of Defense Shoigu by force. The purpose of the mutiny was not to dethrone Putin, but it was nevertheless a clear challenge to his rule. After negotiations, Prigozhin called his troops to a halt before they reached the capital, but much damage was already done. Wagner forces had downed a number of Russian military aircraft, and reactions to the mutiny among the population and part of the military showed that Prigozhin had considerable support. Units in Rosgavrdiya (Russian internal military troops) and the FSB that should have rushed to stop the onslaught chose to sit out the crisis instead. In this way, they demonstrated that Putin could not necessarily rely on them to protect him in case of a similar crisis in the future.

Here, the behavior of the spetsnaz-dominated GRU is of particular interest. The deputy head of the organization, General Vladimir Alekseev, was one of those who negotiated with Prigozhin. While he did advise the Wagner chief to end the munity, there is little doubt that he also showed great sympathy for his protégé's position. After all, the GRU had probably grown fond of and become attracted to its PMC project. When Prigozhin told Alekseev that all he wanted was Gerasimov and Shoigu, the latter matter-of-factly answered "just come and take them."[124] In this way, the march on Moscow not only demonstrated serious ruptures within the Russian security establishment but also put in doubt Putin's degree of support in a crisis. The attempted mutiny was the strongest challenge yet to Putin's rule and could not go unpunished. On 23 August 2023 Prigozhin's plane exploded in midair after leaving Moscow. Although the details are still unclear, most observers expect that this was payback by the president.

In the aftermath of Prigozhin's fall, the landscape of GRU-connected PMCs became increasingly bewildering. A newly formed Redut seems to have been set up in autumn 2021 as an umbrella organization for about 20 nonregular military units that would

sometimes refer to themselves PMCs.[125] It even appears that one of these was the notorious neo-Nazi Rusich group. Thus, ironically, the GRU was employing neo-Nazis in their stated mission to "de-Nazify" Ukraine. Whether the new Redut is just an expansion of the old one, or is something entirely different, is not entirely clear, but relations with the 45th SzVDV Brigade still look to be close.[126] Konstantin Mirzaiants, former deputy commander of the 45th, was in 2023 named to head the new Redut.[127] All this suggests that any distinctions between Russian PMCs and mercenary groups were by 2023 nearly gone. President Putin himself started to talk about "voluntary formations."

The connections to Spetsnaz GRU are also clear, at least for Redut. For example, the Redut subsidiary Volki (Wolves) seems to have trained and fought together with the 16th SzGRU Brigade out of Triguliai in the Tambov region. The connection is less clear, however, in the case of the Konvoi group, established in autumn 2022. Konvoi appears to be a mercenary organization consisting of a jumble of ideologically motivated volunteers and people who identify themselves as Russian Cossacks. Finances most likely come from a Russian oligarch and friend of Putin named Arkadii Rotenberg; the head of occupied Crimea, Sergei Aksenov, is the main political sponsor.[128] Of particular interest is the curious fact that Konvoi appears to have set up camp at Perevalnoe in Crimea and even registered itself locally as the 165th Training Center. That is the same designation that the Crimean school of insurgency had. Thus, Perevalnoe may again have become a place for learning how to become an insurgent, although this time around the purpose is not to spread communism in the developing world.

The final area of irregular warfare is sabotage and foreign operations in peacetime. This not primarily a SzGRU responsibility. Most of it is probably done by other agencies within the GRU, for example Unit 54777 (psyops) or Unit 74455 (cyber operations).[129]

Currently, however, the boundaries between soldiering and peacetime sabotage may be blurring. That has happened before. It should be remembered that Spetsnaz GRU back in the 1950s was responsible for assassinating Soviet émigrés abroad. The KGB soon took over this job.

Within the GRU, this field of responsibility is probably somewhere between what spetsnaz is supposed to do and what the agentura is supposed to do. The Military-Diplomatic Academy of the GRU, attendance to which is the main difference between agentura and spetsnaz operators, has three faculties. The first is for those who go on to become illegal and undercover spies, the second is for coming military attachés, and the third is for officers who will conduct "special operations" in foreign countries.[130] Thus, there seems to be a part of GRU that is engaged in special operations, though separately from the SzGRU brigades and the SSO. Those training in the third faculty probably come the closest to Spetsnaz GRU in terms of their responsibilities, and it is likely that former SzGRU officers who want to switch careers to the agentura are particularly appreciated candidates here.

Currently most infamous among Russian peacetime violent actions have been the activities of Unit 29155. Exhaustive open-source investigations by Bellingcat and other organizations and news outlets have connected this unit to a large number of high-profile cases. These include blowing up a warehouse that contained arms and ammunition meant for the Ukrainian armed forces in the Czech Republic in 2014, the attempted assassination of the Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev in 2015, the attempted assassination of former GRU Colonel Sergei Skripal in 2018, a failed pro-Serbian coup attempt in connection with the parliamentarian elections in Montenegro in 2016, and possibly also the so-called Havana syndrome. In terms of the Havana syndrome, there have been a significant number of incidents around the world in which US diplomats have suffered from head trauma potentially caused by the use of some unknown instruments for sonic attacks. In 2020, a CIA report also alleged that the unit had operated a bounty

program for Afghan militias that gave them economic compensation for killing US troops. Some of these accusations, such as the Czech bomb blasts and the Skripal assassination attempt, clearly seem better documented than, for example, the bounty program.

Unit 29155 has been in existence since the early 1960s. It was established in partial compensation for the spetsnaz officer school that Marshal Zhukov was precluded from establishing in Tambov in the 1950s, a main reason for his demise. Unit 29155 has trained both spetsnaz and regular Russian troops in advanced operational intelligence, and it has trained personnel from friendly countries (in both Soviet and Russian times) in the same disciplines. This training focus, of course, does not preclude the potential existence of an operational sabotage and assassination cell within 29155.

Thus, to sum up, as this book went to publication, the most urgent and politically sensitive SOF tasks have become the remit of a new and, by Russian military standards, exceptionally professional, autonomous, and well-equipped force: the SSO.

The SzGRU brigades still suffer from their unclear double subordination to both the GRU and the regional commands and probably, to some extent, from the fact that the SSO has stolen some of their thunder. They complain they no longer get the attention and resources they need. Training in languages and other disciplines seems wanting, and they are again left without their own institution for officer training.

Nevertheless, they also seem to have found a new purpose in irregular warfare, and as a result they have a stronger position within the GRU than they have had for a long time Furthermore, they had hoped they were about to escape the army intelligence and regular infantry roles they ended up doing without training in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Georgia. There were signs that the army was finally taking seriously the need to build up its own capacities in these areas. The first reports of the use of spetsnaz after the full-scale invasion of

Ukraine in February 2022, however, suggest that little in fact had changed in this regard.

As for naval reconnaissance spetsnaz, more or less fully subordinated to the RJCs, these seem to have degraded completely from a strategic to an operational capability. Instead, the SSO has established its own capacity in Crimea for strategic operations in the naval domain.

The 45th SzVDV Brigade may be in a slightly more elevated position. In terms of being tasked to do strategic missions, they probably rank above the SzGRU brigades but below the SSO. The 45th is still present in most places where the Russian military fights and were at the forefront in the failed Russian attempt to take control of Kyiv in the first days of the 2022 Russian invasion.

Finally, Alpha and Vympel were until the invasion of Ukraine concentrated mostly on domestic tasks. Nevertheless, due to some of their niche capacities, they sometimes also showed up far from home. This is a continuation of Soviet practice. Also at that time the KGB's SOF were ready to deploy almost anywhere abroad if they possessed skills or capacities that the SOF of the GRU did not have. In both Ukraine and Syria, however, military spetsnaz dominated the SOF domain.

THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA AND INSTIGATION OF ARMED CONFLICT IN DONBAS

On 27 February 2014, a combined SSO–SzGRU force embarked on an operation that will go down in spetsnaz annals as one of their most successful ever.[131] The highly surprising and proficiently executed annexation of Crimea is a military highlight in the history not only of these forces but also the whole Russian armed forces. SSO and Spetsnaz GRU played lead in this operation. In terms of spetsnaz

operational glory, it may even surpass the toppling of Afghan President Hafizullah Amin during Shtorm-333 in 1979. The following is a rough account of what happened.

Sometime after 4 a.m. on 27 February 2014, the phone awoke Mykola Balan. It was his duty officer on the line. He informed Balan that during the night unidentified armed men had taken control of the buildings of the Crimean parliament and government in Simferopol—the capital of the partly autonomous Crimea Peninsula in Ukraine. Balan, originally from western Ukraine, was commander of the special forces of the quasi-military units of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ministerstvo Vnutrishnikh Sprav—MVS) in Crimea. He immediately called his superior, the head of the MVS in Crimea, General Valerii Radchenko. The latter, however, possessed no more information than the duty officer did. Nevertheless, Radchenko was convinced that something very serious was taking place. He suggested Balan and himself both get to their places of work as soon as possible. The unidentified men later turned out to be Russian operators from the SSO. At this point, however, nobody knew who they were.

Soon, four leaders from different Crimean agencies met in Radchenko's office on Simferopol's Kirov Street. The group included, in addition to Balan and Radchenko, the head of the coastal defense units of the Ukrainian Black Sea Fleet, General Ihor Voronchenko, and the head of the Ukrainian Security Service (Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy—SBU) in Crimea, Hennadii Kalachov. The four almost immediately started discussing a potential storming to retake control of the buildings. They would never initiate something like that in the absence of orders from Kyiv, but at least Radchenko and Balan wanted to clarify details in case the order should come. Balan calculated that with his 60–80 man special force, plus nearly 100 Ukrainian Alpha forces from the SBU as well as some 200 Berkut riot police forces, they had somewhere in excess of 350 troops ready on the ground in Simferopol.[132] However, he was shocked to learn that neither Berkut nor Alpha were ready to take part in any form of armed action. Berkut,

according to Radchenko, claimed unpreparedness. Alpha simply said they would not join.

What neither Radchenko nor Balan knew was that Ukrainian Berkut and Ukrainian Alpha had already started working for the other side. Whereas the SOF under Balan's command came from all over Ukraine, the local Berkut unit consisted almost exclusively of local Crimeans. Most of them had just returned from Kyiv. There, they had taken part in the failed efforts to end the Maidan popular uprising. (The word "maidan" means "square," as in public square; the Maidan Uprising in Ukraine was a series of demonstrations that began on 21 November 2013 with large gatherings in Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv.) During the course of their days in the Ukrainian capital, Kyivan demonstrators came to see the Crimean Berkut as almost unbelievably brutal. The latter, however, claimed that the brutality had come from the demonstrators' side. Either way, Berkut returned to Crimea in a very gloomy mood. Their motivation to do anything for the new government in Kyiv was zero. Additionally, the strongly pro-Russian officer Sergei Abisov led the unit. Abisov himself later willingly admitted that he and his unit had maintained a close relationship with officers from different units of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea long before Maidan. By 26 February, the day before the Russian annexation started, this association had developed into regular contacts directly with the leadership of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Thus, at about the same time as Balan and the others were debating in Radchenko's office, the head of the Russian Black Sea Fleet asked Abisov to take his Berkut unit north to block one of the two land entrances to the peninsula from the Ukrainian mainland. Abisov willingly complied. According to his own account, he also attempted to make other armed units in Crimea join him in shifting loyalties to the Russian side. These efforts, however, mostly failed.[133]

Alpha, similarly to Berkut, also now worked for the Russians. Valentin Nalivaichenko had been appointed new head of the SBU on 24 February. He recollects that more or less the entire leaderships of

the Simferopol and Sevastopol branches of the SBU had started to cooperate with representatives of the Russian FSB as early as 20 or 21 February. At the time of Nalivaichenko's appointment, SBU in Crimea no longer responded to calls from Kyiv. Nalivaichenko remembers that, in the evening on the day of his appointment, he visited the imposing gray stone building of the SBU on Volodymyrska Street in Kyiv. The premises were completely empty. In the courtyard, he could see burned-out pyres of destroyed documents. Many in the SBU had much to hide from the new leaders of the country, although not everybody joined the enemy.

Thus, for Balan the bottom line was that he had only his own 60–80 fighters ready in Simferopol if the order came to storm. That was obviously not enough. Nobody knew the exact number of the occupiers of the buildings, but judging by footage from surveillance cameras there could be more than 100. Later, about 120 has been the most common estimate. Balan gave some thought to calling in the Ukrainian military, but as long as nobody knew who the occupiers were, this was by definition a domestic conflict. In that case, there was no place for the military. While the four commanders on Kirov Street were still debating different courses of action, they received information that Russian Il-76 transport aircraft had started to land at Gvardiiske Airfield north of Simferopol. This was an ominous sign that the occupation of the buildings was part of something much bigger.

In the evening before all this happened, in the Crimean city of Sevastopol, about 80 kilometers south of Simferopol, Private Andrei Skvortsov and his unit of SSO soldiers stood to attention. The military leadership had put them on alert at their base back in Russia as early as in the afternoon of 22 February. Already that same night, they were on their way to Crimea. First, an Il-76 flew them to one of the Russian Black Sea ports. From there, the missile cruiser *Moskva* took them to Sevastopol. Now, they waited for inspection in the barracks of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Russia

had, in agreement with Ukraine, continued to base its Black Sea Fleet in Crimea despite the fact that the peninsula now belonged to the latter country. In fact, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych had in 2010 agreed to prolong the Russian lease of the Sevastopol bases until 2042 at least.

The soldiers had just changed from their regular uniforms into crisp new, well-ironed, and completely unmarked ones. Those who were privates felt a bit weird looking at their superiors not carrying any of the usual signs of rank. Given the absence of any formal distinction, Skvortsov told his lieutenant he had the feeling he was going with some friends to a wedding rather than with his officers on a military mission. Skvortsov's unit was led by Captain Aleksandr Ushakov. For the briefing, Ushakov was accompanied by a representative of the fleet's intelligence unit as well as the SSO's commander in chief at the time, Alexei Diumin. Many of the men already knew that Diumin had helped Ukrainian President Yanukovych escape to Russia some days before. Diumin said only a few words to Ushakov and then left the room. Alone with the men, Ushakov addressed them to make sure they all understood what a historical mission they were about to embark on:

> I want all of you to know as well as your own family name, that when a Russian soldier sets his foot on Crimean ground, that soil is soaked with the blood of his ancestors three meters deep. . . . Unfortunately, 60 years ago, some political halfwits gave this land to Ukraine. But now, when the Kyiv junta is preparing for the introduction of a fascist order in the peninsula, the people of Crimea want to return to Russia. It is our sacred duty to help them in this endeavor. We are neither occupants nor guests in this land. All we have done is to return home. Do you understand?[134]

The company in unison yelled "We do!" Then Ushakov went over to Skvortsov to test whether the young soldier knew what his orders were for the next day. Skvortsov repeated what he had learned by heart:

> At the signal I will leap from the truck and follow my comrades Grom and Vasil climbing in through window number four on the left wing of the building on the first floor. Next, together with the rest of the team, I will descend to the basement using staircase number two. There, we will take control of the building's heat and electricity supply. If I meet any form of resistance, I will not use my weapons. That is only allowed in case of a direct threat to my own life.[135]

After the lineup, all those who were to take part in the operation watched a video of the interior of the Crimean parliament. Then they went to bed. At 3 a.m., they were wakened and sent on their way to Sevastopol in three Kamaz lorries. The SSO divided into three platoons, one of which was dressed in civilian clothes; two officers wore SBU uniforms. They reached the government and parliament buildings in Simferopol at 4:20 a.m. and entered through a breach in a crowd of pro-Russian demonstrators standing in front.[136]

The first representative of any Ukrainian power structure to contact the unidentified armed men was the head of the local government, Anatolii Mogilev. After sunrise, he approached the barricaded door of the government building. This was his regular place of work. Here, he was told by a man, hooded by a balaclava and with an unmistakable Moscow accent, that he could not enter but that he should leave his telephone number so somebody could contact him.[137] Soon after, Mogilev was able to see camera surveillance footage of the unknown men entering the building during the night. He found confirmation for what he already suspected: the intruders were

undoubtedly professionals. Nevertheless, Mogilev was still confused about their identity. He wondered whether the armed men represented the regular Russian armed forces or "some kind of private Russian military formation."[138] Nobody called him, however, and sometime later he decided to make a second attempt to enter the building. This time he tried to force his way inside. Again, he was in a polite manner told, "My friend, there is no place for you here." Naturally, Mogilev also tried to involve Kyiv in solving the crisis. However, according to him, Kyiv just answered, "Let's wait and see what happens."[139]

The fact that nobody from the Ukrainian side ever tried to force the unidentified armed men to abandon the two buildings is to this day one of the most controversial aspects of the Ukrainians' handling of the crisis. In principle, defeating 120 lightly armed men who had locked themselves up in two buildings with no hostages should not have been an impossible task. Would an immediate response have made a difference? Had Russia decided to annex Crimea no matter what happened? Or were the SSO building occupations an attempt by the Kremlin to test Ukrainian resolve? We do not know for sure, but at least some observers claim to know that the SSO had orders to back down if they met significant resistance or attempts to dislodge them from the occupied buildings.[140] Former Ukrainian Chief of the General Staff, Volodymyr Zamana, later argued that "Putin took Crimea carefully, one step at the time."[141] Thus, it is at least possible to imagine that storming the buildings may have prevented the annexation—but only the Kremlin and the SSO know that for sure.

Be that as it may, the window of opportunity for storming the occupiers quickly closed. The Crimean Tatar political leader Refat Chubarov thinks that by the afternoon of 28 February it was already too late. According to him, by that time "Russian saboteurs and special forces started to creep up all over the peninsula."[142] One of the 120 men even showed up in Balan's office and suggested that he and all his

men disavow Kyiv and come over to the Russian side. Balan had the man handcuffed and asked him to call his superior. A short time later, this superior showed up in Balan's office, saying that if he got his man back the arrest would have no further consequences for Balan personally.[143] Balan relented.

Sometime after Mogilev's two efforts to enter the government building, Russian forces in cooperation with local helpers started to herd people's deputies from around Simferopol and other places in Crimea to the parliament building. The SSO made sure only registered deputies and reporters from Russia's two main TV stations First Channel and RTR could enter. Nobody can say for sure how many deputies they were able to assemble, but the parliament nevertheless voted to replace Mogilev as head of the Crimean government with Russia's anointed candidate, Sergei Aksenov. They also decided that the current Crimean parliament would terminate and that there would be a referendum on greater Crimean autonomy. At the same time, other Russian forces continued to take up positions of control at different crossroads around Simferopol. Similar to the SSO, the latter also bore no signs or symbols giving away whom they represented. When asked, they usually said they were on an exercise or that they were lost. To confuse local authorities even more, many of the Russian soldiers were dressed up in the uniforms of the Ukrainian Berkut riot police.

Among the Ukrainian leadership in Kyiv, there was chaos this morning. Nobody had expected the events in Crimea to happen, nobody knew exactly who the 120 were, and Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov had been in power only for a few days. He took over after former President Yanukovych left the country fearing for his life. When the first news of what was going on in Crimea started to trickle in, Ukraine did not even have a government. Parliament approved a new one only in the afternoon on the same day the annexation started.

Still, the reigning political chaos is most likely not enough to explain why Ukrainian authorities could not respond to the Russian use of force. An additional explanation seems to be that many Kyiv decision makers simply could not believe what was actually happening. Nikolai Holomsha, a western Ukrainian who was deputy public prosecutor in Ukraine and by coincidence present in Crimea at the time, phoned contacts back in Kyiv, asking them to take action. However, according to him, the politicians in Kyiv thought "until the last moment that this was just some kind of political theater. They believed it was a type of blackmail going on, and ⟦they⟧ just could not bring themselves to believe it was a case of Russian aggression."[144] Turchynov himself remembers the day slightly differently. According to him, Kyiv was more than willing to use force against the occupants of the buildings, but they were unable to do so because the chains of command in the ministries no longer worked and because many of the forces in Crimea refused to follow orders.[145] Thus, post-Maidan political chaos, the total unexpectedness of the Russian use of force, the successful Russian use of SOF to create confusion, and the willingness of Crimean power structures to defect to the enemy all contributed to the Kremlin's victorious takeover of the peninsula.

However, this was not the first SSO intrusion into post-Maidan Ukraine. That took place some days earlier on the flat Ukrainian steppe just north of the important Ukrainian Azov Sea port of Berdiansk. On the evening of 22 February 2014, Viktor Yanukovych, still formally president of Ukraine, was fleeing his country. After stops in Kharkiv and Donetsk, he headed for Crimea.

The same evening, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov were sitting next to each other at a concert in the Kremlin. Suddenly, an officer from the Federal Protection Service (the Russian equivalent of the US Secret Service) scurried toward them between the stage and the first row where they were seated. "Number one needs you urgently!" he

hissed.[146] When Shoigu soon after met with Putin, the latter's message was clear: "Sergei Kuzhugetovych, we must hurry to save Yanukovych. There is every reason to believe they will finish him off. We need to pull him out of there!"[147] Putin was by now in regular contact with Yanukovych over the phone. Gerasimov next called the head of the GRU, Igor Sergun, and the head of the SSO, Alexei Diumin. Soon, they both showed up in his office to prepare the rescue. Three hours later, Diumin was on a military plane heading for the Ukrainian border. There, an SSO unit was waiting for him.

Denied admission by Donetsk Airport authorities to take off by plane for Russia, Yanukovych and his security had decided to go by car to Crimea instead. From there, they would try to get to safety in Russia. Despite the darkness, they drove with the headlights off and avoided the main roads. In terms of what happened next, there are different versions in Ukraine and Russia.

Based on evidence later given by members of Yanukovych's security service in court in Kyiv, the deposed president and his men learned that unidentified men with arms were waiting to ambush them close to the city of Melitopol.[148] Hearing this, the head of Yanukovych's personal security, Konstantin Kobzar, called Diumin. The latter dispatched three Russian military helicopters that went into Ukrainian territory and picked them up.

The alternative Russian version, presented by the pro-Kremlin journalist Viktor Baranets, is more dramatic. He claims that unidentified armed men pursued Yanukovych's cort ge of cars. They were even able to stop one of Yanukovych's cars by shooting its tires. The runaways, however, were able to shift everybody from the shot-up car into the remaining vehicles and continue their journey. When they finally met up with Diumin and the SSO, the latter engaged in a short firefight with Yanukovych's pursuers. Covered in this way by the SSO, Yanukovych and his men could load on to the Russian helicopters and get to safety.[149]

Both of these accounts refer to unidentified armed men, but none of them give any indication as to the identity or institutional affiliation of these men. In fact, in the Ukrainian interpretation they may not even have existed. All we hear is that Yanukovych and his security detail had been warned about them and were afraid of them. Regardless of which version is right, however, the Russian and Ukrainian sources seem to agree that Yanukovych was rescued by the SSO that night. For the Russian leadership, this operation demonstrated SSO's strategic utility.

Even before the events in Simferopol and on the steppes north of Berdiansk, Russia had covertly started to move troops into Crimea. Most arrived by boat from the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiisk under cover of darkness.[150] The first special forces troops, including units from the SSO, arrived by plane on 26 February. These were followed by units from the 45th SzVDV Brigade and the 3rd SzGRU Brigade from Tolyatti as well as other units following later by sea.[151]

In addition to the operation to take over the Crimean parliament and government buildings, the SSO was also in the lead in a number of the other operations taking place in the first days of the annexation. These included taking over the command station of the Ukrainian Air Force's "Krym" tactical group; the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy in Sevastopol; the headquarters of the Ukrainian Tactical Aviation Brigade in Belbek; and the compound of the 1st Independent Marine Battalion of the Ukrainian Navy in Feodosiya. SSO was in the lead for all these operations, augmented with units from Spetsnaz GRU, VDV, and the Naval Infantry.[152]

The Crimean operation used speed and surprise to establish facts on the ground, thereby making a military response from the Ukrainian side difficult. True, the Russian success was secured by the transfer of a large number of troops to the peninsula, but the initial action by SSO and other special forces and elite elements was still decisive. From the takeover of the Crimean parliament to the signing of the treaty

making Crimea a part of Russia, it took only 19 days. Both the timetable, the amount of prior planning, and the size of the invading force makes the Crimean operation very different from the follow-on operation in Donbas.

We still do not know exactly when Spetsnaz GRU first started to send operators into Donbas. The Ukrainian war correspondent Inna Zolotukhina has provided one of the first eyewitness accounts. In her book *Voina s pervykh dnei* (The war from its first days) she claims that the forces occupying the SBU headquarters in Slaviansk in late April 2014 "were dressed and equipped exactly as the fighters from Ramzan Kadyrov's Vostok battalion I had seen in Crimea two months earlier." She also contends that "a highly placed representative of the local power structures [in Slaviansk] told me that about 150 instructors from GRU by then had been in place in the city for almost a month."[153] If this information is correct, it means Spetsnaz GRU may have been on the ground as early as mid-March 2014. That is one month before the Donbas anti-Kiev rebellion started in earnest.

The first GRU operative was detained on Ukrainian ground in March. He was arrested together with three others while gathering intelligence on Ukrainian military positions on Chongar Peninsula just north of Crimea. His name was Roman Filatov, and he admitted to being an officer of the GRU. As the result of a personal deal between Russian Minister of Defense Shoigu and the head of the Ukrainian presidential administration, Serhii Pashynskyi, Filatov was sent back to Russia in exchange for Ukrainian Kontr-Admiral Serhii Haiduk and eight other Ukrainian officers then held by the Crimean authorities.[154]

Furthermore, in August 2014 the *Financial Times* was shown pictures from a July military memorial ceremony for 10 SzGRU and two 45th SzVDV men who had returned from Donbas in coffins. All 12 had officially been "on leave" from the military at the time of their deaths. The *Financial Times*'s main source for the story said there could be no doubt about the types of units to which they belonged. On the

photographs, they wore the new Radnik field uniform that until then had been issued only to special forces.[155]

Moscow denied sending Filatov as well any other GRU operative before and after. However, based mostly on selfies photos posted by Russian soldiers in social media, the Ukrainian volunteer group Infonapalm claims to have identified a large number of individuals from different Russian SOF units on Ukrainian soil. They had come from all seven SzGRU brigades as well as the 45th SzVDV Brigade and the FSB.[156] No open source, however, has thus far provided evidence of SSO activity in Donbas. According to the Russian military observer Aleksei Nikolskii: "Based on what we know about how SOF forces ⟦i.e., the SSO⟧ are utilized and for what purposes, it appears that there is no need for their presence in eastern Ukraine."[157] If they indeed have been largely absent from Donbas, that underscores the status of the SSO as a capability of such value and cost that it will be used only when necessary and because others cannot do the job.

In Crimea, Russian SOF largely conducted covert actions without any fighting. In Donbas, they were engaged in the full spectrum of regular SOF tasks. The Ukrainian military observer Konstantin Mashovets claims that Spetsnaz GRU at any time may have had three or four combined units/battalions in Donbas. These detachments contained 250–300 fighters each and were deployed to the theater of operations on a rotational basis among the seven Russian SzGRU brigades. They operated in groups of 10–12 individuals, and they worked closely with GRU signal intelligence units.[158] As for the local separatists, spetsnaz trained them, armed them, and provided intelligence to them.[159] Mashovets further claims that each Spetsnaz GRU group had been set up with "curators" from agentura GRU.[160] If true, this may indicate that the GRU tried to keep political and military assignments somewhat separate. Spetsnaz GRU would do special reconnaissance and military assistance, whereas the political

work would be taken care of by embedded curators from agentura GRU.

In terms of actual fighting, Spetsnaz GRU does not seem to have been used in the same light infantry role in Donbas that they so despised in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Georgia. In fact, they seem mostly to have tried to avoid open combat. That, however, was not always possible. For example, one of the SzGRU officers identified in Donbas is an individual with the call-sign "Krivko." He was wounded in battle at Sanzjarovka, halfway between Luhansk and Donetsk, at the end of January 2015. Later, in May 2015, two soldiers from the 16th Brigade in Tambov were wounded in a battle close to Stsjaste near Luhansk.[161] Machine-gunner Stas Stovpan, the last Ukrainian soldier to leave Donetsk Airport after 242 days of defending it against separatists and Russian troops, even claims that he was able to cut the service stripes off several Vympel operators before leaving the place.[162] Storming the airport of a foreign country does not really sound like something for the FSB and their post-2013 Vympel, but then again this unit was involved as elite infantry during the Chechen wars. It is perfectly possible that the FSB sent some of its own down to Ukraine because there was a need for their skills and because they could get combat training. In May 2020, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi accused Russia of sending snipers from Alpha to Donbas for target practice on Ukrainian troops. In support of that claim, photos taken of these snipers showed them in possession of French Sagem infrared binoculars. In Russia, only FSB and the Federal Protection Service possess this piece of equipment.[163]

Another area of direct action has been sabotage and liquidation in Ukrainian rear areas. One example of such a mission is the Russian GRU agent who was suspected of blowing up train cars of aviation fuel at the Osnova railway station in September 2014. The agent was killed in the attempt. The purpose was probably to create problems for Ukrainian military aviation. Ukrainian sources additionally claim that

combined groups of rebels and Spetsnaz GRU laid mines for and executed attacks on poorly guarded Ukrainian transport convoys.[164]

As in most countries, there were problems with coordination among different agencies. The Russian observer Konstantin Gaaze claims that there was a mix of military officers, FSB operatives, and politicians who implement policy in Donbas who were often unwilling or unable to coordinate their efforts. For example, the Russian Presidential Adviser Vladislav Surkov supervised the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR)/Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) political leaderships, whereas the Russian military directed the DNR/LNR military leaderships. None, according to Gaaze, informed each other very much about their doings.[165] According to the pro-Russia Donbas volunteer Aleksandr Zhuchkovskii, differences of opinions and interests among the various Russian agencies that ran the operations in LNR and DNR were to be expected given the large sums of money often involved.[166] Greed may easily make cooperation and coordination difficult.

In terms of political and strategic impacts, spetsnaz may have played two big roles in Donbas. First, they were probably crucial in making sure that the indigenous Donbas protests against the Maidan Uprisings survived and turned violent. Second, and more uncertain, when conflict gradually erupted between Moscow and some of the initial and ideologically motivated anti-Kyiv rebel commanders, spetsnaz may have been used to assassinate some of them.

Regarding the stoking of rebellion, the Ukrainian oligarch Serhii Taruta claims that he saw with his own eyes how "little green men" (most likely Spetsnaz GRU) played a crucial role. Taruta, himself a Donbas strongman who chose to side with Kyiv, took part in the Ukrainian government's negotiations with protesters in Donetsk in April 2014. He claims that Ukrainian authorities were able to convince those who had occupied the townhall in Donetsk to leave the building in return for money. Basically, they were bribed into submission.

However, as soon as this agreement became known, little green men arrived in Donetsk. They quickly changed the minds of the Donetsk protesters. After the little green men's visit, any negotiated compromise was off the table.[167]

Four days after Taruta took part in these negotiations, a former FSB officer and participant in the annexation of Crimea, Igor Girkin, together with a group of 52 fighters from that operation, arrived in Donbas. They immediately took control of the city of Slaviansk by force. The Slaviansk occupation marked the beginning of the armed rebellion. It is likely that Girkin received some kind of go-ahead from the Kremlin before taking Slaviansk. According to the rebel leader Aleksandr Gubarev, Sergei Glazev, one of Putin's economic advisers, had called to ensure that Moscow would have their backs, including the use of the regular Russian forces, if they went violent.[168]

Zhuchkovskii in his memoir is clear that the protests would not have turned violent without Russian meddling and assurances of support for the rebels.[169] However, that is not to say there was no local initiative. It seems that, after Slaviansk and the assurances of further support from Moscow, local anti-Kyiv rebel commanders initiated armed hostilities on their own. From the beginning, they seem to have had a relatively free hand in building up their own militias. Soon, however, Moscow and several of the original rebel commanders came to see things very differently. A good example is the founder and leader of the Prizrak (Ghost) Battalion, Aleksei Mozgovoi. First, this commander saw the September 2014 Minsk peace agreements between Kyiv, Moscow, and the rebels as a betrayal. Second, he could not accept Russian plans for how the rebellion should be reorganized militarily. Russia and its puppet regimes in Luhansk and Donets wanted the original militias dissolved and their personnel integrated into new and larger formations blueprinted on units of the Russian armed forces. These new military formations were to be called "People's Militias." Mozgovoi was not against the idea of a merger of

the disparate rebel forces as such. However, he wanted his battalion to join the Luhansk People's Militia as one unit, not just dissolve it into the new organization. Third, at least in the case of Mozgovoi, the motives for rebellion against Kyiv seem to have been more social than ethnic. He was interested more in fighting the phenomena of oligarchy and economic exploitation than in defending the linguistic and cultural rights of Russian-speakers. In fact, he may not have seen much of a threat to the latter. Mozgovoi at one point even went as far as saying that "the ideas of Maidan were not that different from ours."[170] This was a completely different narrative from the one now promoted by Moscow, where the ethnic dimension and cultural suppression took the front seat.

For all these reasons, Mozgovoi increasingly became a problem for both Moscow and for the leadership of LNR. On 23 May 2015, he was assassinated on his way to a meeting in Luhansk. From the beginning of 2015 to the beginning of 2017, six others from the initial wave of commanders suffered the same fate. The LNR/DNR and Russian authorities automatically blamed the killings on diversionary detachments from the Ukrainian Special Forces or the SBU Security Service. Most separatists, however, according to Zhuchkovskii, never believed in that. Why would the Ukrainians help the LNR and DNR authorities and Moscow get rid of their own troublemakers? Was not internal conflict in these republics and between them and Moscow to the benefit of Kyiv?

Zhuchkovskii argues that most veterans from those days still suspect that Moscow was behind many if not all of the liquidations. He reminds his readers that great powers generally are known for killing troublemakers around the world with the help of SOF and that Russia is no exception. In the case of Mozgovoi, he has no doubt that "this was obviously an army spetsnaz (i.e., Spetsnaz GRU) mission." That suspicion, however, was contradicted in 2023 by a *Washington Post* investigation into cooperation between the CIA and the SBU after 2014. Here, Ukrainian officials admitted to the newspaper that several

liquidations at the beginning of the war in Donbas attributed to Russian SOF, to Russian PMCs, or to internal squabbles among the rebels were in fact executed by the SBU.[171]

It needs to be mentioned that parts of the SzGRU activity in Donbas probably was outsourced to Wagner. That private military company, along with several others of the same kind, in fact had their test of utility for the Kremlin in the Donbas fighting.[172] The full details of how Wagner and others did business for Spetsnaz GRU and other Russian agencies are still unknown. Most probably, they received equipment and orders from the "mother organization" through in-theater SzGRU curators. For example, the SzGRU officer Oleg Ivannikov is for a time said to have been the SzGRU coordinator for Wagner in Donbas.[173] Open-source investigators at Bellingcat have also connected this officer with the downing of flight MH17. This airliner crashed over Donbas after taking a hit from a missile. Almost 300 innocent civilians died on 17 July 2014.[174]

The Crimea and the Donbas operations had for spetsnaz the advantage of taking place in geographically, culturally, and linguistically familiar territory. That made operations a lot easier than if they had taken place far from home. Soon, however, Russian SOF would again go on a long trip. Not since the Angola and Ethiopia operations of the early 1980s had Russian SOF taken part in sustained and comprehensive campaigns far from home and on a scale of what they were soon to experience in Syria.

SPETSNAZ AS A GLOBAL ASSET—THE CASE OF SYRIA

In October 2015, Russia unexpectedly decided to get involved militarily in the civil war ongoing in Syria. This decision was a clear message to the West that Russia would never be content with being only a regional power. If the West was not ready to accept this, then Russia

would have to force the issue by acting as a global player. After its involvement in Syria, Russia could no longer be ignored. Since the country had annexed Crimea and initiated armed rebellion in Donbas, Western governments largely ostracized the Kremlin. In essence, the Kremlin through engagement in Syria forced its way back to the high table of international affairs.

Syria was not chosen by accident. There were close historical links between the two countries, and everybody knew that the Kremlin hated popular uprisings. However, it was unclear whether Russia would have the logistical means to sustain such an operation.

Militarily, Syria was for Russia first of all an air campaign. Still, Russian presence on the ground would be needed to a degree that the Russian General Staff most likely had not foreseen. The Syrian land forces turned out to be a great disappointment. The problem was that neither the Russian leadership nor the Russian population had much appetite for taking large numbers of causalities so far from home. Thus, the Russian ground component had to be as limited as possible. It consisted mostly of Naval Infantry for guard duties and spetsnaz for combat roles. In addition, more land forces were inserted in the form of Russian private military companies, Syrian proxy forces, and cooperation with Lebanon's Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias. In the beginning, Russia fought Assad's opponents mainly in western Syria. Gradually, however, they also began to take on ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham). This happened first with the battle for Palmyra in March 2016, then later with attempts to dislodge ISIS from the oil resources at Deir-ez-Zor.[175]

For Russian special operations forces, the Syria War was primarily a testing ground for the SSO. Syria may come to be seen as a time of glory for SSO in the same way that Afghanistan was for Spetsnaz GRU.[176] SzGRU brigades and Spetsnaz FSB also took part, but SSO seemed to play the dominating SOF role. Sources often tend not to differentiate between the SSO and SzGRU brigades when they talk

about Russian SOF in Syria. Thus, the division of labor between them is often difficult to identify. The Wagner soldier Marat Gabidullin, who wrote a book about his time in Syria, claims that as long as he was there he saw no Spetsnaz GRU taking part in combat. They mainly did guard duty for generals and staff headquarters. He never heard of them doing raids behind enemy lines or engaging the enemy on the front.[177] If Gabidullin is right, most of the typical SOF tasks in Syria were executed by the SSO, not Spetsnaz GRU.

It seems that the regular brigades arrived first. According to Russian military sources, it was a battalion from one of the SzGRU brigades located in southern Russia that at the end of July 2015 took control of all the main buildings and structures necessary to build up Khmeimim as the main base for Russian forces. After this, the spetsnaz handed over the base to incoming units from the Naval Infantry brigade of the Black Sea Fleet. The latter established the actual security perimeter around the base. On 7 September 2015, the first Russian military aircraft landed at Khmeimim.[178]

The SSO performed a variety of tasks within all three main SOF disciplines—special reconnaissance, direct action, and military assistance—in Syria. In terms of the first, SSO filled a significant reconnaissance-in-force role in the Syrian mountains and deserts. They also took on joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) functions. The combination of SSO reconnaissance, satellite-guided ammunition, and JTAC missions was a crucial part of the Russian war effort.

In terms of the second discipline, they were used to soften the front for regular Syrian forces to break through. For example, about a week of enemy position harassment by a unit of around 10 SSO personnel using wheeled Tiger APCs and quad bikes was usually enough to wear out enemy forces for Syrian regular forces to do the rest of the job.[179]

In another example, from October 2015, the regular Syrian army was unable to take Kvaires Air Base in Aleppo Province from Syrian

opposition groups. In particular, they were vulnerable to the enemy's TOW (tube launched, optically tracked, wire command link guided) antitank missiles. Many Syrian MBTs and APCs were lost, and it was decided that small diversionary groups were needed to take out as many as possible of the enemy TOW teams before the army again moved forward. SSO conducted three nightly raids to achieve this, and then the regular army moved in and took over the airport.[180]

A third example comes from the 2016 battle between a detachment of SSO and fighters from the Al-Nusra Front in Aleppo Province. The detachment was originally called in to help the Syrian army with nothing more than reconnaissance and JTAC. Initially, everything went well, but one morning the detachment found itself under massive fire. In the course of the night, their Syrian allies had simply disappeared for unknown reasons. The SSO, however, decided not to give up the high ground they controlled. They thought that in case this one was lost, it might take weeks of fighting to get it back. Thus, they held their ground against four waves of attacks from the Nusra fighters until new Syrian reinforcements finally arrived. The SSO fighters later estimated enemy losses at 300. Four of the SSO taking part in this operation later received medals directly from President Putin himself for heroism in battle.[181]

At least as important for the Kremlin, however, may be that the SSO allowed Russia to keep the number of troops on the ground below 5,000 and the number of causalities to a minimum.[182] The operations in Syria were never particularly popular in Russian opinion. Limited deployment of ground troops and relatively few causalities, however, helped avoid any serious domestic dissatisfaction.

Three types of Russian technological modernization did make changes to the deployment of spetsnaz in this war compared to most previous conflicts where these forces had been engaged: (1) arrival of Russian precision weapons; (2) operational autonomy of mobility; and (3) surveillance drones and loitering munitions. In previous conflicts,

Russian precision weapons were simply not there. In Syria, they still made up only a small portion of total ordinance used, but they were numerous enough to make an impact. Russia was for the first time able to experience the tremendous effect of combining fighter aircraft with precision ammunition and SOF, as the United States had done in Afghanistan.

Importantly, in Syria spetsnaz controlled their own means of motorized transportation. This initially included the domestically produced Tiger lightly armed all-terrain vehicle but also quad bikes. The SSO had originally rejected the Tigers in favor of the Israeli Zibar light strike vehicles, but in Syria the Tigers seem to have proved their worth.[183] The availability of Tigers meant two things: Mission initiation was no longer dependent on negotiating with other branches for the use of resources in limited supply, and more weapons and ammunition could be brought along to reduce unit vulnerability and increase combat firepower. Furthermore, they could use a vehicle they had trained on and knew how to use. This was very different from sitting down with the instruction manual for a BTR a few hours before combat, as Evgenii Sergeev from one of the SzGRU brigades had done in Chechnya. One experienced spetsnaz officer stated that Russian SOF had probably never been as mobile in any previous war. According to him, with the Tiger they could just "drive over to the theater of operation, do their work, and return home for a rest."[184] This independence of mobility was much aided by the relatively flat terrain characterizing many operations in Syria. A higher portion of mountainous operations and longer distances would have demanded a shift to helicopters, and in that case some of the old quarrels would likely have resurfaced.

The use of surveillance drones and loitering ammunitions severely reduced the need for spetsnaz to expose themselves and thus prevented causalities. For example, the Lantset-1 loitering drone could at that time carry about one kilogram of explosives and stay in the air for

about 30 minutes. In Syria, SSO used the Lantset for destroying enemy vehicles on the move and enemy artillery positions. In Ukraine, after February 2022, the new and heavier Lantset-3 has been used with significant effect against Ukrainian armored vehicles and air defense systems. Some commentators expect the Lantset-3 could be a game-changer in that war by degrading enemy capacity for air defense and thereby opening the way for the free use of Russian air forces.[185] Already in the case of Syria, however, the Russian military observer Ruslan Pukhov warned that successful invention is not the same as successful mass production. According to him, Russia has always been better at coming up with new ideas than at creating the conditions for their serial production, and the Lantset in all probability contains foreign parts not easy to come by because of technology-related sanctions against Russia.[186] In August 2022, the producer of the Lantset partly confirmed this notion by complaining about the problems the company had in scaling up production.[187] Still, as this book went to publication, Lantsets continued to be a serious threat to Ukrainian forces.[188]

Finally, a crucial area of activity for the SSO was the training of indigenous forces via military assistance. Originally, the need for such activity had probably not occupied Russian military planners that much. As demonstrated in Russia and elsewhere, military and political authorities expected and had planned for a quick victory.[189] The Russian air force would merely assist their Syrian ally by providing the air cover Syrian ground forces needed to do the job. Expectations may have been that this would take as little as two to three months.[190] When the Russians arrived, however, they found the Syrian army to be in far worse condition than anticipated. After familiarizing himself with the local situation on the ground, General Alexander Dvornikov, the first commander of the Russian forces in Syria, concluded that the Syrian army had been "completely exhausted" already by the summer

of 2015.[191] Thus, unless improvements took place within the Syrian forces themselves, the Russian air campaign might end up being a futile undertaking.

Russia deployed advisers to most Syrian army units from the battalion level and up, and in parallel with the start of the air campaign they tried to create a new fourth Assault Corps. This was stitched together from a huge number of existing regular and irregular units. The experiment, however, largely failed. Among other reasons, it was based on the assumption that corrections in command and control would be sufficient. Such was not the case, as vital improvements were necessary to motivate and train soldiers. Instead of trying to change the 4th Corps, the Russian military decided to start from scratch with a new 5th Corps. This corps would consist entirely of volunteers, and they would be offered salaries that were attractive by Syrian standards. Russian instructors conducted training, and Russians were in command at both the operational and the tactical levels.[192] And yet in this case the Russian instructors struggled to create truly competent units. The internal Russian estimates of efficiency vary. Some question whether the Russian advisers had much impact at all, whereas others point to the Tiger Division as an example of successful Russian training.[193] The Tiger Division is of particular interest here, because it seems to have been the responsibility of the SSO.

For spetsnaz, the military advisory activity seems to have had two main tracks. One was to train regime forces; the other was to expand cooperation with independent militias. The latter included the Iran-backed Hezbollah.[194] In September 2019, the Russian government daily *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* confirmed that Russian SOF was giving their Syrian counterparts two-month courses in special operations warfare.[195] Not many details, however, of this activity have become known from open sources. Some Russian analysts expect SSO to have been better at training foreign forces than previous Soviet and Russian advisers and

trainers were, but not enough details are available yet to make certain conclusions.[196]

We also know relatively little about the content of the SSO military assistance missions. In addition to the officially admitted two-month courses, it seems clear that SSO on many occasions fought together with the Tiger Division. They also seem to have provided security detail for the Tiger commander Suheil al-Hassan. This commander, despite his alleged extreme brutality, seems to have become something of a Russian favorite among Syria's upper military ranks.[197] In May 2018, he received the Russian Suvorov Order for his war efforts.

In addition, there is evidence that Russian SOF fought alongside Hezbollah, as seems to have taken place in the Syrian government's retaking of eastern Aleppo. Here, Russian SOF dressed in Hezbollah uniforms, and Hezbollah raised a Russian flag to prevent Israeli airstrikes against their positions.[198]

It is worth mentioning that the SSO in Syria seems to have taken on the role of military innovator similar to what has happened with SOF in other countries.[199] That was seldom the case before. The SzGRU brigades were traditionally not very technologically savvy. The grab-your-rucksack-and-personal-firearm standard was dominant for much of the Soviet and post-Soviet period. Furthermore, when spetsnaz learned new things from actual on-the-ground operations, as in Afghanistan, lessons were often deliberately ignored. They did not fit the dominant big war paradigm.

Syria, however, may have become a turning point, and least for the SSO. Reports from the forces themselves suggest that they started to operate in new ways and that they tested new technology for the other branches of the armed forces. For example, in terms of doctrine they learned that they do not always have to go deep. In fact, they can sometimes be more useful at the front than they thought they could and still avoid turning into elite infantry. This means that they can

bring more weapons and equipment, which in turn made them even more interested in new technology. They also learned to become proactive. According to one operator on the ground, "We now in many cases dictate the rules of the game."[200]

Finally, Spetsnaz FSB seems to have taken part in limited operations in Syria. Given that Syria is neither Russia nor the Russia's Near Abroad, Syria should not really be their turf. Nevertheless, in February 2020 Russian media started reporting about the deaths of two Alfa operators near Aleppo. An investigation by the opposition Russian newspaper *Novaia Gazeta*, however, found that, instead of being the causalities of Syrian opposition forces in combat close to Aleppo, the two had in fact died in government-controlled areas near Latakia. The newspaper speculated that Moscow had sent the two Alpha operators at Syria's request to provide security for a high-level, secret Syrian-Turkish negotiation meeting. The suspicion was that hard-line elements among Assad's supporters had had the Russians killed in an effort to prevent the negotiations from taking place. The meeting, according to this source, was called off. Instead, fighting renewed between Syrian forces and Turkey-supported militias.[201]

While the 2008 war against Georgia may have led to a low point in the prestige of spetsnaz, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Syria had the opposite effect. This has a lot to do with the proven efficiency of the SSO operating as the tip of the spear in Crimea. In addition, they helped make it possible for Russia to handle the unexpected weakness of the Syrian ground forces without resorting to introducing major Russian ground forces. In 2017, the new head of the GRU, Igor Korobov, received the Hero of Russia Order for his agency's contributions during the war in Syria.[202]

There is little doubt that the operations in Ukraine and in Syria gave the MOD much more influence in Russian foreign policy than it used to have. Still, in the case of Ukraine, the limited warfare of the 2014–2022 period (from the annexation of Crimea to the full-blown

invasion of Ukraine) did not yield the results Russia was hoping for. One reason for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was probably that the efforts to advance Russian foreign policy goals by working through proxies had failed. Spetsnaz GRU and the SSO played a big role in training and organizing those proxies.

EPILOGUE
STUMBLING INTO THE FUTURE

On 25 February 2022, the second day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the progovernment Russian newspaper *Vzgliad* (Opinion) published an article titled "An Exploit by Spetsnaz Opened the Road to Kiev."[1] In celebratory tones, the article declared that "on Friday the Russian army entered Kiev." The article added that "hundreds of millions of people around the world saw a video on CNN accompanied by the words *Russian spetsnaz*." It went on to describe how the 45th SzVDV Brigade had secured Hostomel Airfield northwest of Kyiv for follow-on regular VDV troops. The operation was termed "a knife in the heart of the Kyiv regime." True, the article admitted at the time of its publication that some unexpected resistance had been encountered. Full control was not yet secured. Still, the fall of Kyiv was not in doubt and this operation would be one of the most important spetsnaz triumphs of all times, according to the story. In fact, these forces had made possible the salvation of Russia as a great power. Instead, as everybody soon came to realize, *Vzgliad* had counted the chickens before the eggs were hatched. Both this operation and most of the rest of the invasion would fail spectacularly in terms of what Russian authorities had planned for and expected.

What exactly happened at Hostomel? Around 5 a.m. on 24 February, the Ukrainian National Guard unit located next to the

airport was put on alert. Kyiv's main international airport, Borispil, had already been bombed. At 6 a.m., missiles started to hit the National Guard garrison. Later that day, around 11 a.m., civilians noticed about 20 helicopters flying low over the large reservoir (a body of water known as the "Kyiv Sea") northeast of Hostomel. They were heading straight for the airport. Aboard were spetsnaz from the Russian 45th SzVDV Brigade. They had flown along the Dnipro River from Belarus. The group consisted of a mix of Mi-8 transport helicopters for bringing in troops and Ka-58 attack helicopters for air cover. The plan was that the 45th would rapidly take control of the airport and secure a safe landing for follow-on Il-76 transport planes containing regular VDV troops.[2] If successful, the operation would put a significant number of Russian elite forces very close to the Ukrainian capital only hours after the start of the war. If they could exploit the moment of surprise, these forces may have been able to take prisoner or kill much of the Ukrainian political leadership.[3] Thus, in essence they could have decapitated the Ukrainian state by taking away the ability for centralized decision-making.

Nothing in the way the helicopters approached the airport suggested that they expected much resistance. The operation had initially been made possible because Russia, in the first hours of the invasion, had been able to destroy two Ukrainian air defense sites that screened the river. This opened a gap through which the helicopters could fly unhindered.[4] At around 11:20 a.m., the first helicopter started to engage Ukrainian defenders at and around the airport. Already in this first wave, three of the attack helicopters were shot down by Ukrainian MANPADs from the ground.

A 25-year-old Ukrainian veteran of the war in Donbas, Second Lieutenant Sergei Falatiuk, downed the first. Before that day, Falatiuk had seen the relatively new (post-Soviet) Russian Ka-52 attack helicopter only in photos. As he ran onto the runway and readied his Igla MANPAD for firing, he raised his head. The Ka-52 was coming

directly at him not very far off the ground. Falatiuk let the helicopter pass, spun around 180 degrees, and released a missile in pursuit. The Ka-52 exploded in midair. Falatiuk's lucky shot was a great morale boost for the rest of the Ukrainian defenders at Hostomel that day.[5]

But other helicopters were able to land troops. According to an anonymous Russian spetsnaz soldier who took part in the operation, they had trained on deploying from a helicopter once on the ground in less than 10 seconds.[6] Some landed directly on the tarmac, but after the shootdowns most headed for a forested area immediately north of the airport.[7] A fierce fight between VDV Spetsnaz and a mix of Ukrainian defenders ensued. According to Ukrainian sources, as many as 40 percent of the Russian soldiers who descended onto the tarmac in the first wave of attack were killed by Ukrainian troops.[8]

After about three hours of fighting, however, the Ukrainian defenders started to run out of ammunition.[9] By the admission of the Ukrainian defenders themselves, the 45th fought very professionally. In addition, the constant fire from the remaining Ka-58s was a problem for the Ukrainians throughout the battle.[10] Soon, Russian artillery, driving down the 100 kilometers from Belarus, had reached areas close to the airport. These added to the shelling of the Ukrainian defenders. Furthermore, there were rumors of additional armored Russian columns on the way.[11] The defenders, however, had sufficiently managed to delay the attackers. At around 3 p.m., the Ukrainian military had scrambled enough fighter aircraft and artillery to bomb and destroy the runway.[12] After that, any attempt by the Russian side to land large transport aircraft full of troops was not possible.

The Ukrainian positions became more and more tenuous, yet they did not withdraw from the airport until the evening of 26 February.[13] After that, it was kept under artillery fire, which in the end forced the Russians to remove most of the helicopters. Russia finally gave up the

airport on 31 March as part of the general withdrawal from Kyiv and the rest of northern Ukraine.[14]

There was to be no repeat of previous spetsnaz successes such as Prague, Kabul, and Crimea. One Western observer later designated the Hostomel operation "a defeat for the ages."[15] A Ukrainian source claims that the 45th lost up to 70 percent of its personnel in the battle for Hostomel.[16] This figure, however, has so far not been confirmed by other sources.

No detailed account of the role of spetsnaz in this war is possible. The events are too recent and the sources too few and unreliable. However, the little information that does exist points to a familiar pattern: spetsnaz have been among the best of the Russian troops, but not in the role of special operations forces.

NATO operates with three kinds of SOF missions: direct action, special reconnaissance, and military assistance. At the beginning of the Cold War, the two first dominated Soviet spetsnaz doctrine and training. The Soviet leadership saw military instruments of power mainly as tools in larger-scale, high-intensity conflicts. That was also true for the special operations forces. In case of war, these forces would incapacitate enemy mobile nuclear weapons in Europe and create general havoc behind enemy lines. Furthermore, they would provide Soviet leadership with strategic and special intelligence unobtainable through other means.

Initially, the third leg, the military assistance portfolio, had a major war character. In the 1960s such missions became a major focus for spetsnaz organizing and training. At that time, the Soviet Central Committee adopted a special resolution on the need to have personnel that could train partisans "in the rear areas of capitalist countries" in case of a new major war. The trigger seems to have been a domestic reevaluation of a fatal mistake made by the Soviet leadership in 1938, when all Soviet partisan units and their weapon storages were destroyed.

Gradually, however, the fear of an imminent great power conflict diminished. It was possible to see the great power competition in less violent but still very real terms. Both parties recognized that a limited use of military force to gain advantage in the rivalry between the two superpowers was possible without provoking major conflict. That was especially true if the forces deployed had a small footprint and their presence could be plausibly denied. Thus, for the Soviet Union spetsnaz took on a dual role of keeping unreliable socialist allies from breaking out and of furthering Soviet interests in the developing world. Still, neither the Soviet Union nor Russia developed a SOF capacity specifically dedicated to these types of missions in the same way that the United States did with the Green Berets, for example. The establishment in 2013 of the SSO and the roles they have played in the war in Syria is probably the closest Russian has come to a typically Western use of SOF. But Spetsnaz GRU on a number of occasions did engage in military assistance missions. That happened inside the Soviet Union with the Crimean school of insurgency as well as abroad. Spetsnaz were on occasion engaged in Asia and the Middle East and especially in Africa in the 1980s. That trend was followed during the post-Soviet period in the civil war in Tajikistan as well as in Chechnya (especially the Second Chechen War), in Syria, and in Ukraine after 2014.

It was also within this violence-below-the-threshold-of-war framework that the KGB developed their own special forces in parallel to those of the military, especially Vympel. Despite strained institutional relations between the military and the KGB, the new Spetsnaz KGB received much training and support from the military.

The big picture is that, despite smaller episodes and risky training missions in the socialist bloc or the developing world, spetsnaz did not engage in protracted combat of any significance until the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For the first 30 years of the existence of spetsnaz forces, very few saw any warfare. Evgenii Borisov, the lieutenant who helped create the 91st Spetsnaz Company in the

Russian Far East in the early 1950s and went on to build and expand SOF units in many parts of the Soviet Union, retired from service in the mid-1970s without ever fighting in battle. That, however, would not be the case for those who came after him. Borisov's son fought as a SzGRU operator in Afghanistan, and his grandson did the same in Chechnya.

In late 2022, the Russian YouTube channel *Russkii. Voin* (Russian. Warrior) aired an interview with "Ivan," an anonymous SzGRU soldier.[17] He had by then served in the war in Ukraine for three months. Ivan started his tale by emphasizing that spetsnaz was created for operations deep in the enemy's rear. In summing up the 10 months in Ukraine for his unit, however, he lamented, "there are in fact no clever spetsnaz tactics employed." According to him, the only thing that operational leadership wanted from spetsnaz was "some supermen on the front line." If this interview is genuine, it gives a peek into the deployment of these forces in this war. According to Ivan, "the best spetsnaz could hope for" in Ukraine in 2022 was to undertake tactical and operational reconnaissance missions. "In the worst of cases," they were ordered to stand guard duty, to protect military columns, or to fight as light infantry in reconnaissance-in-force operations. This was because daring missions deep in the enemy rear, which could have yielded strategic outcomes, were just too time-demanding to plan and required too much support dedicated to spetsnaz from other units. Thus, operational leaderships always shied away from them.

Ivan's experiences are corroborated by other observers. Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, who base their assessments on contacts within Russian SOF, also highlight the old tradition of using spetsnaz in the light infantry role.[18] A journalist of the Russian service of the BBC, based on her own interviews, came to the same conclusion that, "in practice, tasks that would normally be solved by regular infantry" are instead "solved by spetsnaz, Naval Infantry[,] and VDV."[19] Clear examples of this include the fighting of the 3rd SzGRU Brigade from

Togliatti at Lyman in September 2022 and the 14th Brigade taking part in the storming of Vuhledar in February 2023.[20] In both cases, spetsnaz fought as regular infantry in poorly planned battles that resulted in huge Russian losses.

It was a particular source of embarrassment to Ivan that the Ukrainians were often able to use their SOF in the way that Spetsnaz GRU would have liked to be used. On this point, he is seconded by one of the strongest critics of such misuse, the former SzGRU officer Sergei Kozlov. He finds it an utter humiliation that the Ukrainians on occasion are actually able use their SOF in their enemy rear while Russia is not.[21]

As a result of this misuse of spetsnaz, Kozlov argued in autumn 2022 that the 3rd, 10th, and 22nd Brigades have taken casualties in this war not seen since Afghanistan.[22] The Russian service of the BBC was at that time, through investigative work, able to establish the identity of 151 SzGRU personnel killed. More than 20 percent of them were officers.[23] The real number was likely much higher. Finally, in April 2023, US intelligence estimates leaked by a young National Guard member suggested that spetsnaz had suffered even worse than previous evidence indicated. According to this information, the three SzGRU brigades mentioned just above may have experienced a 90–95 percent attrition rate. Equally astonishing, the most numerous unit within the SSO, the 346th Spetsnaz Brigade, may have returned to Russia with only 125 of 900 fighters deployed.[24] If this information is true, then the best of the best—the SSO—seem to have been used in the same way as the regular SzGRU brigades: as elite infantry.

In terms of the Spetsnaz FSB forces Alpha and Vympel, there is information that both take part in arrests and liquidations in occupied territories.[25] In fact, according to analysts from the UK think tank RUSI, the FSB-directed administrations for each occupied Ukrainian county (*oblast*) has at its disposal an Alpha as well as other spetsnaz

elements for conducting raids within their areas of responsibility.[26] They may in particular have used operators from these units with similar experience from operations in Chechnya. Still, anonymous sources claimed in September 2022 that these operations had not been particularly successful and that many had been returned to Balashikha.[27]

The bottom line is that Russian spetsnaz to this day are used for jobs they are not trained for. They often do these jobs well, but it prevents them from conducting the deep missions that could produce damages to the enemy of strategic importance or provide Russian leadership with the kind of special intelligence that would have affected operational planning. The reasons for this state of affairs seem to be found in the inability or unwillingness of others parts of the military to use SOF according to doctrine, as well as in the fact that many regular army units often need the better-trained spetsnaz alongside them for combat and intelligence missions.

The largely bloodless annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the demonstrations of power by the SSO in Syria probably lifted the spirits of many spetsnaz operators. However, the failures and deaths in Ukraine, first at Hostomel and then at many others places, after February 2022 may already have seriously undermined that mood. Regardless of which side emerges victorious in Ukraine, Russia will be weakened militarily as a country for years because of this war. If that reduced conventional military capability is combined with a continuation of the fight against the West, Russia is likely to rely even more than before on nuclear weapons for deterrence and on gray-zone/hybrid warfare for offensive purposes. The potentially catastrophic losses by Spetsnaz GRU and the SSO in Ukraine after February 2022, however, will likely have severely undermined the capacity for the latter type of operations. True, the potential return of Vympel to such missions, as well as the formation of new Russian private military companies, may compensate somewhat. Still, in the

long run the main issue to resolve for spetsnaz is likely to be whether the disastrous experiences in Ukraine will induce changes that finally lets these forces become the special operations forces they always have seen themselves to be.

By that time, however, it is unclear what kind of Russia these forces will serve. The decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine was, in terms of regime survival, the most risky political decision ever made by post-Soviet Russia. Thus, future spetsnaz may be serving as the military vanguard of a hardened, totalitarian, anti-Western regime or, alternatively, of a post-defeat reform government seeking a new rapprochement with the West, or of something between.

NOTES

PROLOGUE

1. These details of Stepan Zhuravlev's funeral and of the 2nd SzGRU Brigade's entry into Kharkiv on 27 February 2022 come from an anonymous correspondent for the Russian opposition TV station Nastoiaschee Vremya who was there (www.currenttime.tv/a/za-90-tysyach-ubivat-lyudey-kak-v-pskovskoy-oblasti-horonili-pogibshego-v-ukraine-boytsa-spetsnaza-gru/31932841.html), as well as from an online video by the Ukrainian military journalist Iurii Butusov and from another online video posted by the Ukrainian military showing the interrogation of SzGRU Seargent Maxim Veretekhin, www.youtube.com/wach?v=iFW4gjZRqPE.

2. Major Sergei Kozlov, a veteran of Spetsnaz GRU, is the primary editor of and contributor to a historical narrative series on Russia's spetsnaz forces comprising four volumes published in 2009 (two separate volumes covering 1950–1979 and 1979–1989) and 2010 (1989–1999 and 1999–2010); two additional volumes were published in 2013 (1701–1941 and 1941–1945). The four earlier volumes contain numerous contributions from spetsnaz veterans, with extensive material and commentary by Kozlov. The series title can be translated as "Essays on History," a comprehensive record of spetsnaz forces from the participants' perspectives. The volumes used in this book will be cited here as Sergei Kozlov, ed., with others, *Spetsnaz GRU Ocherki Istorii: Istoria sozdania ot rot k brigadam 1950–1979 gg* (Moscow: Russkaia Panorama, 2009) [hereinafter cited as Kozlov or Kozlov, ed., *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*]. Kozlov's "In actual fact . . . " quotation is at page 11.

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7. Woodward and Jenkings, 76.

8. Stephen Kotkin, "The State—Is It Us? Memoirs, Archives, and Kremlinologists," *Russian Review* 61 (January 2002): 35–51.

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1. PREPARING FOR A MAJOR WAR, 1950—1979

1. Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 79.

2. Evgenii Borisov, "91-aia rota spetsnaznachenia," in Kozlov, ed., *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 47–57.

3. John Prados, *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 64.

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5. Sergei Romanov, "Interviu s Riadovym Zapasa Sergeem Dubko," in Sergei Kozlov, ed., with others, *Spetsnaz GRU Ocherki Istroii: Afganistan—Zvezdnyi Chas Spetsnaza 1979–1989 gg* (Moscow: Russkaia Panorama, 2009), 244 [hereinafter cited as Kozlov or Kozlov, ed., *Spetsnaz GRU: 1979–1989*].

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8. Evgenii Borisov, "8-aia obrSpN—brigada stroitelei," in Kozlov, ed., *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 160.

9. See Borisov, in Kozlov, ed., *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 160, 155.

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12. Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 18.

13. Sergei Kozlov, "Spetsnaz Brosili Na Borbu s Krizisom Perevodchikov v Sirii," *Vzgliad*, October 1, 2020, and Sergei Kozlov "Kak Spetsnaz GRU Zarabotal Svoiu Legendarnuiu Reputatsiiu," *Vzgliad*, October 24, 2020.

14. Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 14.

15. Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 129.

16. Pavel Golitsyn, "Ot teorii k praktike," in *Spetsnaz GRU Ocherki Istorii: Istoria sozdania ot rot k brigadam 1950–1979 gg*, ed. Sergei Kozlov (Moscow: Russkaia Panorama, 2009), 151.

17. Golitsyn, "Ot teorii k praktike," 151.

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24. Prados, *The US Special Forces*, 21–22.

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26. Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 76.

27. Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov* (London: Icon Books, 2013), 6, and Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 147.

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33. Aleksei Sukonkin, *Desant Strany Sovetov*, 54, and Aleksandr Kolpakidi and Aleksandr Sever, *Istoria Spetsnaza GRU: Ot Voennych Partizan do Vezhlivych Liudei* (Moscow: Veche, 2017), 408–409.

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50. Kolpakidi and Sever, *Istoria Spetsnaza GRU*, 413.

51. Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 178.

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53. Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU: 1950–1979*, 133.

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INDEX

Page numbers reflect those in print edition.

Note: page numbers followed by *f* and *t* refer to figures and tables respectively.

Afghan Army
  commando brigades, 85–86
  intelligence operations, 88
  obstacles to effective functioning of, 86–87
  poor support of Soviet forces, 69–70, 93–94
  Soviet advisers to, 84–87, 88
  Soviet's reluctance to trust, 86–87
  special forces battalions, 85
Afghanistan
  Soviet history of interest in, 56
  Soviet killing of president Amin, 54–62
Afghanistan occupation
  advisers to Afghan military, 84–87, 88
  Afghanistan Syndrome following, 53
  as beginning of Soviet fall, 107
  change of strategy after failures, 67, 106
  costs of, 107
  cross-border flow of food and weapons, 74–78
  as embarrassment to leadership, 105
  end of, 104–105
  enemy-centered approach, 104
  establishment of police stations, 102–103
  as first major use of spetsnaz, 217
  ground attack fighter aircraft in, 94
  incursions into Pakistan, 78–79
  KGB power to control military decisions, 91–92
  Kobalt MVD unit in, 102–103, 105

lessons from, as undigested, 142
mujahideen intelligence, 80
mujahideen's strategy, 63
naval spetsnaz and, 36
number of Soviet troops, 105
Operation Zavesa (Curtain), 75–78, 97, 106
population's turn against Soviets, 107
regular army's poor performance, 63, 101
revolts in Kandahar and Herat, 99
Soviet expectations of easy conquest, 64–65
Soviet weak points, 87–88
temporary peace agreement with Tajik warlord Masood, 91–92
uselessness of tanks and tracked vehicles, 73–74
Afghanistan occupation, intelligence in, 87–94
Afghan military and police operations, 88
Afghan security service (KhaD) and, 88, 93
Army intelligence units, 88
border troop operations, 88
delays in delivery of, 90, 91
double agents and leaks, 90, 93
GRU operations, 88, 89–91, 93
KGB operations, 88, 92–93
military advisers' operations, 88
mistrust and blame among agencies, 89–91
and mujahideen counterintelligence, 91
obstacles to effective collection, 90
poor performance of Afghan agencies, 93–94
poor quality of, 88–90
Spetsnaz KGB operations, 88, 92–93
successful cooperations, 93
as weak point in Soviet military, 87–88
Afghanistan occupation, Spetsnaz GRU in, 115*f*
addition of dedicated helicopters, 75, 95, 97
adjustment of tactics, 106
advisers to Afghan military, 84–87
attack on Khadirzai and Delaki-Paiin, 79–82
attack on mujahideen base at Krer, 78–79
brutality of tactics, 68–69
casualties, 70, 105

chain of command, 72, 78
close area surveillance from helicopters, 66, 95
and command's emphasis on countable results, 74
critics of, 62
as first combat experience, 16
increase in size, 67, 72, 75–76
initial jack-of-all-trades role, 67
joint operations with Army units, 73
lack of training for mission types, 62–63
large impact of, 106
later role interdicting supply caravans, 67
limited intelligence available to, 66
number of operations, 105
number serving in, 105
and Operation Zavesa (Curtain), 75–78, 97, 106
raids on villages, 67–70
reconnaissance missions, 70–72, 95
relative independence in early war, 72
relative success of, 62–64
tensions with regular army, 72–73
training of VDV units, 73
units, 65–66, 69, 72, 74–78, 76*t*
withdrawal, 105
Afghanistan War, US, 107
Africa, current Russian engagement in, 53
African National Congress, 46
aircraft
and communication with ground forces, 6, 66, 95
ground attack fighter aircraft in Afghanistan, 94
See also helicopters
AK-47 rifles, 3
All-Services Officer Assembly (1992), 122
Alpha special forces, 113*f*–114*f*
in Afghanistan, 99
and constitutional crisis of 1993, 125–128, 160
and coup attempt against Gorbachev, 123–125, 160
current status of, 193
in First Chechen War, 141–142
founding and missions, 40

refocus on domestic tasks under CSO, 185
return to SOF operations under Putin, 183–186
in Second Chechen War, 153–154
size of, 40
and SSO, 180
in Syrian Civil War, 212–213
in Ukraine War, 219
and Wagner PMC revolt, 162
Amin, Hafizullah, 54–62
Andropov, Iuri, 38, 41, 56, 100–101, 104
Angolan Civil War, spetsnaz in, 44, 45, 46–48
Anti-Terrorism Center. *See* Center for Special Operations (CSO)
assassination
attempted assassination of Dudaev, 156–157
KGB and, 8
Russia law legalizing, 185
Spetsnaz *likvidatory* unit for, 8–9, 14–15
SzGRU assassinations of émigrés in 1950s, 192
of uncooperative rebels in Donbas rebellion, 205–206

Baku training center for foreign naval special operations forces, 52, 53
Balan, Mykola, 194, 198–199
Basaev, Shamil, 149, 157, 165–168
Bekrenev, Leonid, 25–26, 31
Boldyrev, Vladimir, 169, 170–171
Borisov, Evgenii, 1–7, 18, 95, 217
Brezhnev, Leonid, 41, 43, 57
Brezhnev Doctrine, 107
Britain
ships damaged by Italian special forces in World War II, 28
special forces nuclear-armed midget submarines, 32

Cambodia, SzGRU in, 44
Center for Special Operations (CSO), 183–186
Chechen War, First, 140–150
Alpha in, 141–142
artillery in, 146
ceasefire of 1995, 149
Chechen hostages at Budennovsk hospital, 149

Chechen nationalists' declaration of independence, 140
costs vs. benefits of, 160–161
end of, 149–150
first phase capture of Chechen capital, 142, 144–146
45th Spetsnaz VDV (Airborne) Brigade in, 148–149
FSK-directed attack on Dudaev's palace, 140–141
full-scale Russian invasion, 141
helicopters, shortages of, 148
Khasavyurt Accords, 150
naval spetsnaz in, 142
poor quality of Russian army and, 143–144
repeating of mistakes of Afghanistan occupation, 108, 142, 143, 147–148
Russian expectations for victory, 143
Russian naval Spetsnaz and, 37
Russian psychological warfare unit in, 149
second phase counterinsurgency operations in mountains, 142, 146
SzFSB in, 160
war-related deaths, 161
Chechen War, First, SzGRU in, 160
attack on Dudaev's palace, 141
and capture of Chechen capital, 144–146
heavy casualties, 143, 146–147
lack of dedicated transportation, 145, 147–148
lessons learned, 161–162
misuse of, 142–146
number of units, 142
successful operations, 148
Chechen War, Second, 150–159
Alpha in, 153–154
attack on Grozny, 152
Cossack spetsnaz unit in, 159
costs vs. benefits of, 160–161
end of, 151
first phase battles for cities, 150
FSB in, 153, 156
helicopter losses, 153
hunting of Chechen leaders, 153
intelligence problems, 152–153, 155
Interagency Task Force coordinating spetsnaz forces, 154–155

joint operations by spetsnaz units, 154–155
lack of relevant military doctrine, 155
legal restrictions on regular armed forces, 153
Night of the Jackal, 152
questionable causes of, 150
Russian Chechen units, 155–159
Russian improvements since First War, 151–152, 160
Russian naval Spetsnaz and, 37
second phase mountain warfare, 150–151
special Russian Mountains Grouping in, 150–151
spetsnaz units in, 123
SzFSB in, 151, 153, 154–155, 160
village actions, value of Russian Chechen units for, 158
Vympel in, 153–155
war-related deaths, 161
See also Vostok (East) Battalion; Zapad (West) unit
Chechen War, Second, SzGRU in, 160
casualties, 151
Chechen units under, 156–158
joint operations with other spetsnaz units, 154–155
large part of fighting done by, 151, 160
leadership's ignoring of intelligence from, 152
lessons learned, 161–162
limited access to helicopters, 153
as part of Mountains Grouping, 151
role after regular army departure, 151
Spetsnaz GRU in, 45
Chechnya, weak ties to Russian Federation, 161
China, and Soviet Afghanistan occupation, 76
Cold War
military insecurity of US and Soviet forces, 7
and spetsnaz mission, 217
SzVMF as unused in, 35–36
US special forces' role in, 35–36
Crimea, annexation of, 194–202
capture of military installations, 201
45th SzVDV Brigade in, 201
influx of Russian forces by air and sea, 196, 201
Kyiv's delayed response to, 198, 199–200

parliament's forced vote to install Russian-controlled government, 199
pervasive special forces presence, 198, 199
President Yanukovych's flight to Russia, 197, 199, 200–201
and prestige of Russian spetsnaz, 213
Russia justifications for, 197
Russian Black Sea Fleet and, 196
seizure of Crimean capital, 194, 196–198
signing of annexation treaty, 201
SSO in, 193, 194, 196–198, 199, 201
SzGRU in, 194, 201
and Western sanctions, 168, 207
CSO. *See* Center for Special Operations
Cuban special forces, 41, 47
Czechoslovakian invasion, Spetsnaz in, 45

Decima MAS. *See* Italian naval special operations forces
democracy in Russia, Chechen wars and, 161
developing world, Soviet intervention in, 43–49
avoidance of confrontation with West, 43
combat operations, 44, 47–48
increase in, after mid-1970s, 43–44
resentment by local forces, 48
secrecy surrounding, 44, 48
use of special operations forces, 43
Diumin, Alexei, 180–181, 197, 200, 201
Dnepr, Operation, 9
Donbas rebellion, 202–207
arrest of SzGRU agent in, 202
and Flight MH17, downing of, 206
Russian assassination of uncooperative rebels, 205–206
Russian denial of involvement in, 202
as Russian-instigated, 168, 204–205
spetsnaz operatives in, 187, 202–206
spetsnaz operatives killed in, 202
spetsnaz training of separatists, 203
and Western sanctions on Russia, 207
Drozdov, Iurii, 41, 42, 46, 58
Dudaev, Dzhokhar, 140, 149–150, 156–157
Dzhemal, Orkhan, 164, 166, 167

ENOT PMC, 189–190

fighter divers (*boevye plovtsy*), 37
Flight MH17, 206
foreign insurgents, Soviet 165th Training Center for, 49–53
45th Spetsnaz VDV (Airborne) Brigade
  in annexation of Crimea, 201
  current status of, 193
  in Donbas, 202
  experimentation by, 149
  in First Chechen War, 148–149
  founding of, 132–133
  in Georgia War, 169–170
  importance as Russian SOF asset, 134
  and political murder of Kholodov, 133–134
  and private military companies, 189, 191
  as Soviet/Russian special forces unit, xxi
  in Ukraine War, 214–216
freedom of the press in Russia, xix
frogmen, Soviet. *See* Spetsnaz VMF (Voenno-Morskoi Flot)
Frunze Academy (Army Staff College), 117
FSB (Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, Federal Security Service)
  Center for Special Operations (CSO), 183–186
  in Donbas, 202
  expansion of overseas activities in late 2000s, 39
  return to SOF operations under Putin, 183
  and Second Chechen War, 150, 153–154
  as successor to KGB, 39, 140
  and SzGRU downgrading in Serdiukov Reforms, 176
  and Ukraine War, 219
  See also Spetsnaz FSB
FSK (Federalnaia Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki, Federal Service of Counterintelligence)
  in First Chechen War, 140–141
  as successor to KBG, 140

Georgia War, 163–169
  Chechen Vostok Battalion in, 163–168, 170
  and ending of post-Cold War peace, 168–169
  friendly fire incident in, 163–164, 167–168

radical Russian military reforms following, 169
Serdiukov reforms provoked by, 172
Georgia War, SzGRU in
claimed use to provoke conflict, 171–172
criticisms of, 169–172
misuse of intelligence gathered by, 169
roles outside their training, 167
supervision of Chechen Vostok Battalion, 163–168
units, 169–170
uses and misuse of, 170–171
Gerasimov, Dmitrii, 128, 188, 190–191
Gerasimov, Valerii, 162, 174, 177, 186, 200
Golitsyn, Pavel, 9, 10, 23, 48–49
Golybin, Oleg, 128–129, 135, 139
Gorbachev, Mikhail
attempted coup against, 123–125, 128–129, 160
campaign against alcoholism, 144–145
dismantling of KGB, 125
Grachev, Pavel, 133–134, 178
Gromov, Boris, 64–65, 74, 75, 92, 93, 105, 155
ground-effect vehicles (ekranoplanes) for naval SOF, 31
GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate, Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie)
Academy, three courses of study at, 192
intelligence operations in Afghanistan (OAGs), 88, 89–91, 93
and Russian SOF reform efforts, 178
sabotage, assassinations, and other foreign operations in peacetime, 191–193
Sergun takeover as head, 186
spetsnaz founded as military arm of, xv
spetsnaz subordination to, 1, 17–18
ties to private military companies, 188–189, 191
Unit 29155, 14, 192–193
Unit 54777 (psyops), 191–192
Unit 74455 (cyber operations), 191–192
and Wagner PMC revolt, 190–191
See also Spetsnaz GRU
Gubanov, Nikolai, 67–69, 72
Guinea-Bissau, Soviet training of insurgents, 49, 50

Havana Syndrome, 192

helicopters
lack of spetsnaz access to, as chronic problem, 6, 181–182
losses in Chechen wars, 148, 153
shortages of, in Chechen wars, 148, 153
training for parachuting from, 29, 30
helicopters in Afghanistan occupation, 94–99
advantages provided by, 94
available models ill-suited to environment, 97
early inability to communicate with ground forces, 66, 95
failure to replace destroyed units, 148, 153
improvements in newer models, 97–98
lack of training in special operations use, 94–95, 96, 98
pilot shortages, 98
pilots' lack of cooperation, 95, 96
poor coordination between services and, 97
for Spetsnaz GRU, 66, 75, 95, 97
US Stinger surface-to-air missiles provided to counter, 94
Hezbollah, in Syrian Civil War, 211–212
hydronauts (*gidronavty*), 37–38

INF. *See* Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
Interagency Task Force (ITF), 154–155
Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), 8
Iran, and Soviet Afghanistan occupation, 74–75, 76, 106
Iraq, attack on Russian embassy in, 185
ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham), 207
Israeli-Egyptian War of 1967–1970, naval Spetsnaz in, 36
Italian naval special operations forces (Decima MAS), influence on SzVMF, 28–29
ITF. *See* Interagency Task Force
Iutov, Valentin, 92–93, 101, 102, 103, 105–106
Ivashutin, Petr Ivanovich, 15–16, 39, 55, 64, 70–71, 107, 176, 186

Kadyrov, Akhmad, 156, 158, 161, 168
Kadyrov, Ramzan, 151, 158–159, 166
Kadyrov, Zakirzhon, 89, 90–91, 93
Kaskad. *See* Spetsnaz KGB in Afghanistan (Kaskad/Omega)
KGB
in Afghanistan, 88, 91–93, 101, 103–104
and coup attempt against Gorbachev, 123–125

First Chief Directorate (FCD), 41, 42
FSK and FSB as successors to, 39, 140
Gorbachev's dismantling of, 125
Ivashutin's criticisms of leadership, 15–16
and killing of Amin, 57
mistrust between Army and, 83
and political assassinations, 8
Special Department officers (*osobistry*) monitoring political loyalty in military, 82–84, 91
special operations forces, founding of, 38
See also Alpha special forces; Spetsnaz KGB; Vympel (Pennant)
Khasavyurt Accords, 150
Kholodov, Dmitrii, 133–134
khozsposob (self-reliance) system of Soviet Army, 4–7
Khrushchev, Nikita, 7, 11, 13–14, 15, 56
Kiev Higher Joint Command College, 21
Kluiev, K. V., 80–82
Kobalt MVD unit, 102–103
Kolesnik, Vasilii, 54–55, 57–61
Kolesnikov, Iurii, 27, 31–32
Kolosov, Sergei, 116–120, 138–139
komitetchiki. *See* Spetsnaz KGB
Konvoi PMC, 191
Korabelnikov, Valentin, 176, 179
Kozlov, Sergei
on First Chechen War, 141
on misuse of spetsnaz, vii, 218
on Ryazan school, 175
on Second Chechen War, 153, 156
on secrecy of spetsnaz units, 26
on Soviet problems in Afghanistan, 87, 89, 95, 96
on Soviet strategy in Afghanistan, 106
on SzGRU in Afghanistan, 79, 106
on SzGRU mission, 8
on Tajikistan Civil War, 135, 139
on VDV relations with SzGRU, 20–22
volume of Spetsnaz GRU memoirs edited by, xix
Kozyrev, Andrey, 137–138
Kriuchkov, Vladimir, 56–57, 100, 102, 123–124

KUOS (Kursy Usovershenstvovania Ofitserskogo Sostava—Advanced Training Courses for Officers), 38, 39, 40, 58, 99
Kurochkin, Konstantin, 47, 48, 85
Kvachkov, Vladimir, 16, 69–70, 118, 130–132, 135–139, 160, 179

Lebanon, Russian hostages held by Palestinians in, 45–46
Libya
  Soviet training of insurgents from, 51
  SSO covert military assistance in, 187

Magomedov, Soltan, 54–55
Maidan Uprising, 195
Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU—Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie). *See* GRU
Makarov, Nikolai, 172, 176–177, 179, 186
Mamsurov, Khadji-Umar, 11–15, 189
Manchenko, Vladimir, 135–136
Masood, Akhmed Shah, 75, 91–92
Medvedev, Dmitry, 168–169, 172
military districts, spetsnaz subordination to, 1, 17–18
Ministry of Defense Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI), 37–38
Ministry of Justice, in Second Chechen War, 154
Ministry of the Interior (Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del—MVD)
  anti-terrorism forces, 41
  Kobalt unit in Afghanistan, 102–103, 105
  and Second Chechen War, 153, 154, 156
Mogilev, Anatolii, 197–198, 199
Musienko, Alexandr, 110*f*, 135–136, 139, 152, 157, 178
MVD. *See* Ministry of the Interior (Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del—MVD)

Naqshbandi brotherhood, and Second Chechen War, 156–157
naval special operations forces
  foreign, Soviet training of, 52
  related units, 37–38
  See also Spetsnaz VMF (Voenno-Morskoi Flot)
Nikolskii, Aleksei, 122, 202–203
Nord-Ost (Dubrovka) Theater hostage crisis, 184
nuclear ship mines, British, 32
nuclear weapons, Soviet/Russian

miniature, for destroying ships, 32–33
recovery from Kazakhstan, 129–131
nuclear weapons, US
miniature, carried by special forces, 32
mobile tactical missiles deployed in Europe, 2, 7, 8

OAGs. *See* Operativno-Agenturnye Gruppy
Ogaden War, spetsnaz in, 44, 46, 48–49
Olympics of 1972, Palestinian terror attack at, 40
Omega. *See* Spetsnaz KGB in Afghanistan (Kaskad/Omega)
165th Training Center for foreign insurgents (Perevalnoe, Crimea), 49–53
161st Center for the Training of Officers in Intelligence, 14
Operativno-Agenturnye Gruppy (OAGs), 88, 89–91, 93

Pakistan, and Soviet Afghanistan occupation, 62, 64, 74–75, 78–79, 106
Palestinians
Russian hostages taken in Lebanon, 45–46
Soviet training of, 51–52
Spetsnaz VMF operations with, 36
terror attack on 1972 Olympics, 40
parachuting
Arbalet-2 parachute system, 115*f*
by frogmen, 30
Soviets' World War II experiences with, 9–10
SzGRU experimentation with, 19, 29
SzGRU training in, 2, 4, 6, 114*f*–115*f*
SzKGB training in, 38–39
partisans of World War II, influence on spetsnaz, 9, 17, 22–23
Patriot PMC, 189
pensioner commands, Russian proposal for, 188
Pirania midget submarines, 30–31
PMCs. *See* private military companies
Polish crisis of 1980–1981, naval Spetsnaz and, 36–37
Political Department officers (*zampolit*) in Soviet military units, 82–84
Politkovskaia, Anna, 166
Popovskikh, Pavel, 133–134, 149
Portugal
and Angolan Civil War, 47–48
colonies, Soviet training of insurgents in, 49–50

Prigozhin, Evgenii, 162, 188–189, 190–191
private military companies (PMCs)
concerns about use of, 190–191
Soviet outsourcing of violence to, 187–191
in Syrian Civil War, 207, 208
See also Wagner company
Protei and Proton diver propulsion vehicles, 30
psychological warfare unit
in First Chechen War, 149
of GRU, 191–192
Putin, Vladimir
and Chechen Wars, 150, 156, 161
and ending of post-Cold War peace, 168
and FSB return to SOF operations, 183
on goals of Ukraine invasion, xv
Kvachkov's activism and, 131–132
on Russian ties to African anticolonialism, 53
and Wagner PMC revolt, 190–191
and Yanukovych's flight to Russia, 200

Redut (Redoubt) PMC, 189, 191
Rusich group, 191
Russian Armed Forces
challenges in post-Soviet period, 121–122
critics of tactics, xvi
financial straits of 1990s, 117–118, 121, 148, 149
punishment of officers for negative reports, 152–153
radical reforms following Georgia War, 169
replacement of Soviet Armed Forces, 117
Russian Federation
concerns about NATO expansion, 168–169
constitutional crisis of 1993, 125–128, 160
early opposition from military, 122

Safarov, Sangak, 119, 120, 121, 137–138, 139
Saidov, Faisali, 118–121, 138, 139
Senezh. *See* 322nd Center for the Education of Specialists
Serdiukov, Anaolii, 169, 172, 176–177, 179, 180, 182, 186
Serdiukov Reforms

and bureaucratic infighting, 175–176
characteristics vs. Western reforms, 172, 175–176
cost cutting as focus of, 172
Georgia War as spur to, 172
and navy SOF, 174
officers' hatred of Serdiukov due to, 169, 172
public protests against SzGRU closures, 173
SzGRU and, 11, 15, 169, 172–177
Sergeev, Evgenii, 73, 89–90, 144–147
Sergun, Igor, 174, 186, 200
Sharipov, Vladimir, 58–62
Shashenkov, Dmitrii, 25–26, 28, 29, 31
Shchit (Shield) PMC, 189
Shoigu, Sergei, 162, 174, 186, 190–191, 200, 202
Shtemenko, Sergei, 8, 11–13, 109*f*
Shtorm-333, Operation, 54–62
Sirena diver propulsion vehicles, 30
Skripal, Sergei, 9, 14, 192
Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki (SVR), 42, 176
SOF. *See* special operations forces
Soldatov, Andrei, 131, 185, 186, 218
Somov, Vladimir, 71–72
sources for this study, xix–xxi
Soviet Airborne forces (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voiska—VDV)
in Afghanistan, 73
criticisms of Spetsnaz GRU in Afghanistan, 62
influence on Spetsnaz, 9–10
large operations of World War II, 9
Spetsnaz GRU's recruitment from, 18–19
training of Spetsnaz GRU officers, 13, 14, 20–21, 174–175
training of Spetsnaz KGB, 38–39
See also 45th Spetsnaz VDV (Airborne) Brigade
Soviet military
military unit party cells, 84
officers monitoring ideological loyalty in, 82–84
political officers' meddling in military decisions, 83–84
Soviet Union collapse
challenges for military following, 117–118, 121–122
and division of armed forces, 129–130

and loyalty of small elite forces as issue, 121
Russia recovery of nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan, 129–131
tests of spetsnaz loyalty following, 123–130
and United Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States, 129–130
Soviet Union commitment to global triumph of communism, 42–43
Special Operations Command (Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsii—SSO), 112*f*, 177–182
Alpha and, 180
in annexation of Crimea, 193, 194, 196–198, 199, 201
bureaucratic standing of, 181
control by political elite, 179
creation of, 177, 179
current structure of, 182
direct subordination to Chief of General Staff, 181
earlier attempts at high-level SOF force, 178–179
early commanders, 180–181
focus on urgent and politically sensitive tasks, 192
FSB in development of, 179–180, 181
heavy losses in Ukraine War, 219–220
helicopter access as ongoing issue in, 181–182
ignoring of SzGRU in development of, 179–180
naval units, 113*f*, 182
and President Yanukovych's flight to Russia, 201
as Russian special forces unit, xxi, 217
346th Spetsnaz Brigade, 182, 219
second center established at Kubinka, 180–181, 182
in Syrian Civil War, 208–212, 217
SzGRU concerns about, 181
and technological innovation, 212
Western SOFs as model for, 177–178, 217
winter training, 112*f*
special operations forces (SOF)
and hubris, 21
reasons for increased use of, vii
Russian/Soviet, units included in, xxi
use to diminish potential escalation, 43
special operations forces, US
combat roles during Cold War, 35–36
miniature nuclear weapons carried by, 32
navy SEALS, 36

reasons for creation of, 10
underwater demolition teams (UDTs), 36
Special Operations Forces Day, 112*f*
Special Technical Bureau (St. Petersburg), 26
spetsnaz, Soviet/Russian
evolution of mission, 216–217
founding of, xv–xvi, 1–2
lack of major deployment in first 30 years, 217
as term, xxi
Spetsnaz FSB
complaints about dysfunction at, 183–184
as successor to Spetsnaz KGB, 123
in Syrian Civil War, 212
and Yeltsin's consolidation of power, 128
See also Center for Special Operations (CSO)
Spetsnaz GRU (SzGRU)
in Angolan Civil War, 46–48
assassinations of Soviet émigrés in 1950s, 192
and coup attempt against Gorbachev, 128–129, 160
covert military assistance in recent years, 187
current status of, 192
cutting of number of companies, 10
definition of, xxi
division of labor with Spetsnaz KGB, 39
in Donbas, 202–203, 206
early leaders overseeing, 12–16
early secrecy surrounding, 3–4
early struggles to retain independence, 10–11
efforts to absorb into Airborne forces, 28
expansion of, 5, 17, 21
experiments with all-officer unit, 178
founding of, xv–xvi, 1–2, 8
frequent misuse of, vii
in Georgia War, 169–172
helicopter access as ongoing issue for, 182
influence of World War II partisan movements on, 9, 17
institutionalization, 1960s–1979, 16–24
and killing of Amin, 55–61, 65
lack of coordination with Spetsnaz KGB, 39, 42

lessons learned from conflicts of 1990s, 161–162
likvidatory assassination unit, 8–9, 14–15
in Ogaden War, 48
original 46 units, 1
original purposes of, 2, 7–8, 9–10
outsourcing of violence to private military companies, 187–191
peacetime core cadre units, 18
as perceived threat to Soviet leadership, 13–15
poorly trained conscripts as issue, 18
post-Soviet-period challenges, 121–122, 129–131
recruitment from Soviet Airborne forces, 18–19
recruitment of officers, 21–22
recruitment of personnel, 1–2, 18–19
return to GRU subordination, 186
Russian recovery of Soviet nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan, 130–131
Russia's growing use of, xix, 186
Russia's post-Soviet loss of brigades to other successor states, 122, 135–136
Serdiukov Reforms and, 11, 15, 169, 172–177
size, in 1960s–70s, 17
slide from special forces to light infantry role, 24
small unit sizes, reasons for, 9–10
sons of higher military and party officials in, 19
Soviet Airborne influences on, 9–10
in Syrian Civil War, 208
tensions between officers with different training, 20–22
ties to private military companies, 188–189, 191
in Ukraine War, 192
in Vietnam War, 46
wartime expansion capacity, 18
and Western SOF, similarities and differences, xviii–xix
See also Afghanistan occupation, Spetsnaz GRU in; Chechen War, First, SzGRU in; Chechen War, Second, SzGRU in; Tajikistan Civil War, SzGRU in

Spetsnaz GRU training
centers for, 13–14, 20–22
and encouragement of independent mindset, 21, 22
for establishing partisan organizations behind enemy lines, 23
experimentation in, 19
of first units, 2–7
focus on major war with West, 16

in foreign languages, 23, 175
and *khozsposob* (self-reliance) system of Soviet Army, 4–7
of officers, 13–14, 20–21, 174–175
parachute training, 2, 4, 6, 19, 29, 114*f*–115*f*
postwar education deficits and, 4
range of mission types in, 8
of sergeants, 20
Spetsnaz KGB (komitetchiki)
challenges of post-Soviet era, 121
definition of, xxi
division of labor with SzGRU, 39
founding of, 38
intelligence operations in Afghanistan, 88, 92–93
and KGB political dominance, 40
and killing of Amin, 58–61, 65
lack of coordination with SzGRU, 39, 42
renaming as Spetsnaz FSB, 123
secrecy surrounding, 39
training, 38–39
Spetsnaz KGB in Afghanistan (Kaskad/Omega), 99–104
bribing of mujahideen to change sides, 100
and KGB insurgency experience, 101
lack of appropriate training, 102
lack of experienced agents, 99–100
mission overlap with Spetsnaz GRU, 100, 101
missions, 100
MVD Kobalt unit and, 103
number and types of operations, 105–106
number of troops, 105
operation in parallel with Army, 102
size and areas of operation, 99
turn to population-centered approach, 103–104
Spetsnaz VMF (Voenno-Morskoi Flot), 24–38, 111*f*
availability of domestically-produced equipment, 29–30
degrading from strategic to operational capability, 192
diver propulsion vehicles, 29–30
early lack of equipment, 26–27
in First and Second Chechen Wars, 37
as formally part of GRU, 24

founding of, 24–26
ground-effect vehicles (ekranoplanes) for, 31
influence of Italian naval special operations forces on, 28–29
influence of Western films on, 29
in Israeli-Egyptian War of 1967–1970, 36
and midget submarines, 26, 27, 28, 30–32
miniature nuclear devices for destroying ships, 32–33
modern missions, 32–33
navy leadership's skepticism about, 24, 25, 27, 28, 31–32
Navy's lack of doctrine of planning for, 27
in Northern fleet, closing and reopening of program, 33–35
operations with Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 36
plans to attack coastal oil and gas facilities, 33
plan to fold into Naval Infantry, 28
and Polish crisis of 1980–1981, 36–37
problems with icy waters, 33, 35
separate, related units, 37–38
Serdiukov Reforms and, 174
SSO and, 182
Stalin's purges of military and, 26
strong integration with Navy, 24
swimmer delivery devices, 32
technology captured from Nazi Germany, 24–25, 30
training for big war with NATO, 36, 39
unit sizes, 26
units lost by Russia in Soviet Union breakup, 26
as unused in Cold war conflicts, 35–36
SSO. *See* Special Operations Command
Stalin, Joseph, 5, 7, 11, 13, 26
submarines, Soviet
Spetsnaz VMF midget submarines, 26, 27, 28, 30–32
US SOSUS passive sonar system and, 34
Sutton, H. I., 24, 28, 35
SVR. *See* Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki
Syrian Civil War, Russia in, 207–213
Afghanistan Syndrome and, 53
cooperation with militias, 211–212
need to limit casualties, 207
political motives for engagement, 207

and prestige of Russian spetsnaz, 213
and private military companies, 207, 208
spetsnaz dedicated transportation in, 209–210
spetsnaz's role in, 207–213
SSO covert military assistance to Tiger Forces, 187
SSO in, 208–209
and technological modernization, 209–210
training of indigenous forces, 210–211
training of Tiger Division, 211–212
weakness of Syrian forces and, 207, 211
SzGRU. *See* Spetsnaz GRU
SzKBG. *See* Spetsnaz KGB (komitetchiki)

Tajikistan Civil War
cooperation of Russian and Uzbek SzGRU units in, 136
Iurchiki's brutality, 119–120
Iurchiki's lack of training or weapons, 119
Iurchiki victory, 121
Russian views on, 137–138
Soviet support of Iurchiki against Vovchiki, 117, 118
Vovchiki's ousting of president Nabiyev, 135
Tajikistan Civil War, SzGRU in
alliance with Iurchiki forces, 118–119
cooperation of Russian and Uzbek SzGRU units in, 136, 139
deployment, 118
as first operation consonant with their training, 138
indiscriminate use of firepower, 119
lessons learned, 161–162
mission, 117
operation with limited government direction, 136–138, 139–140, 160
troubled relations with Iurchiki allies, 116–117, 119
weapons and organizational aid given to Iurchiki, 139
Taraki, Nur Muhammad, 56, 57
terrorism
elite units founded to counter, 40–41
Nord-Ost (Dubrovka) Theater hostage crisis, 184
Palestinian hostage-taking at 1972 Olympics, 40
See also Center for Special Operations (CSO)
346th SSO Spetsnaz Brigade, 182, 219

322nd Center for the Education of Specialists (Senezh), 178–179
renaming as Special Operations Command, 179
SSO operations at, 182
Tikhonov, Aleksandr, 183–185
Triton midget submarines, 30
Tursunkulov, Rustem, 58, 60–62

Ukraine
Maidan Uprising, 195
SzGRU in, 192
See also Crimea, annexation of; Donbas
Ukraine War
Chechen units in, 159
and future of Russian government, 220
Russian justifications for, xv–xvii
shootout between FSB and Russian military in Kherson, 185
spetsnaz casualties in, xv–xvii, 215, 216, 218–220
spetsnaz's failed attempt to capture Hostomel Airfield, 214–216
Wagner PMC revolt, 162, 190–191
United Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States, 129–130
United States
advanced equipment captured by Soviet spetsnaz, 44, 45, 89, 144
Afghanistan War, 107
Cold War concerns about military, 7
SOSUS passive sonar surveillance system, 34
Stinger surface-to-air missiles in Afghanistan, 7, 45, 89, 94, 144
See also nuclear weapons, US; special operations forces, US
unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), Russian experiments with, 149
"The Use of Submarines to Execute Sub-sea Launches of Intelligence Operators into Enemy Territory" (Margolin), 25
Uzbekistan
Spetsnaz GRU unit gained in Soviet breakup, 135–136
and Tajikistan Civil War, 135, 136–137

VDV. *See* Soviet Airborne forces
Viazma, Operation, 9
Vietnam War
Soviet's diminished fear of US following, 43
Soviet spetsnaz in, 44–45, 46

Vityaz (Knight) unit, 41
Volki (Wolves) PMC, 191
Vostok (East) Battalion
  in Georgia War, 163–168, 170
  in Second Chechen War, 157–159, 178
Vympel (Pennant)
  in Afghanistan, 103
  analytical division, 104
  in Angolan Civil War, 47
  as closest to Western SOF models, 177–178
  and constitutional crisis of 1993, 125–128, 160
  and coup attempt against Gorbachev, 124–125, 160
  current status of, 193
  deployments of 1980s, 42
  in Donbas, 203
  expansion of foreign activities under CSO, 185–186
  founding of, 41, 217
  friction with FCD, 42
  missions of, 41, 42
  refocus on domestic tasks under CSO, 185
  return to FSB control, 142
  return to SOF operations under Putin, 183–186
  and Russian hostages held by Palestinians in Lebanon, 45–46
  in Second Chechen War, 153–155
  training of, 41
  in Ukraine War, 219, 220
  and Wagner PMC revolt, 162
  Yeltsin's downgrading of, 128

Wagner company
  and Donbas rebellion, 206
  founding of, 188
  revolt by, 162, 190–191
  Soviet outsourcing of violence to, 187–188, 190
  Vympel agents posing as members of, 186
West, Russian conflict with
  concerns about NATO expansion and, 168–169
  ending of post-Cold War peace, 168
  intervention in Syria as assertion of global role, 207

White House (Russian parliament)
and constitutional crisis of 1993, 125–128
and coup attempt against Gorbachev, 123, 128–129

Yamadaev, Ruslan, 158–159
Yamadaev, Sulim, 157, 158–159, 165–168
Yanukovych, Viktor, 196, 197, 199, 200–201
Yeltsin, Boris, 122–129
Yousaf, Mohammad, 64, 87, 94

Zapad (West) unit, in Second Chechen War, 156–158, 178
Zelenskyi, Volodymyr, 203–204
Zhuchkovskii, Aleksandr, 204, 205–206
Zhukov, Gerogii, 11–14, 121, 192
Zubarev, Dmitrii, 50–52

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